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THE APOCALYPSE SYNDROME

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signed by candidate

Date:

28/11/08

1

Dr Vincent Sebastian Bach, Manhattan, New York

March 2007

HE HAD LOST THE CURE for the most devastating plague of modern times.

And now I have nothing. I've become . . . nothing, young Dr Vincent Sebastian thought, as he sat in the black stretch limo screeching away from the clamorous mob outside the Jacob Javits Convention Center. In darkness, sandwiched by these goons who'd brought him there to face one of the most dangerous men in the country, he trembled—not from fear—but the great humiliation he'd suffered just moments ago.

Standing at the podium of the Center's grand auditorium, presenting his seminal paper on the cure, the audience of preeminent scientists—people he'd always idolized—had risen in scorn and walked out. Now, his vision of the future, his mother's dying wish for him seemed distant, remote as Pluto.

Christ! He swallowed hard at the memory. How small she'd become. How frail. Her body in the repose of evening, sallow skin over bones as the virus sucked the last of her into its maw. She'd taken his hand, barely whispered, "Your gift of genius is the key, Vincent, the mark of the Shaman as my father before me. I beg you, don't let this silent scourge take our Christian . . . the way it's taken Dad and now. . . me. If anyone can conquer this, it's you. And know . . . I'll always be watching over you."

Yeah, great genius I turned out to be, Vincent thought as he relived the media chaos during his flight from the auditorium—

"Dr Bach, this disease has already claimed tens of millions globally, how could you justify such an unscientific approach to a cure as yours?"

"Dr Bach, is the New York Hypothesis a prank?"

"Dr Bach, People Magazine would like you to confirm the theory that an alien race brought you this hypothesis—"

Then, as if from nowhere the nattily dressed pair of goons in black tie had stepped into his path. The one with the great peppered mustache, the Sam Elliott lookalike, had slipped him a card. Edward Alderon Styles, CEO, Sloane-Wright Biotech, it said. "Our boss wants to see you," he'd growled into Vincent's ear.

A fate worse than the international shame he'd just suffered flashed through Vincent's mind. He gulped, thought to flee, then considered the media mob, his zero options and relented as the man parted the throng like Moses.

EDWARD ALDERON STYLES. Vincent had never met or seen the man before, yet in the run up to tonight's Conference, the reclusive tycoon's lawyers had made several lucrative overtures for the cure. Overtures he'd ignored. It was the Sloane-Wright colossus' notoriety and Styles' dark reputation for ruining scientists' careers that left the young genius wary. Big Pharma in the States, with their financial muscle and lobbying powers had become the medical Mafia and the invisible Styles was undoubtedly the Don. He wooed the most promising scientists with generous salaries. There was even talk in the circles that he had scientists killed when they lost him money. He shipped his hapless protégé's to the company's African or South American plants, then eliminated them far from US eyes. Rumor perhaps, yet Vincent didn't need to court that kind of danger. With this plague spreading in the US he believed there would be a feeding frenzy for his work. That this night would be the start of a new life for him and renewed

hope for his dying brother, Chris.

How wrong he had been.

Scorned by the very establishment he depended upon to make his discovery a reality, the dream was gone, lost forever. Yet it was not his imminent ruin he feared as much as Chris' torture. It was why he had sacrificed everything. Like a gambler, so sure of the windfall, he'd consumed every penny of his parents' considerable life insurance payout in the singular quest for the ultimate elixir.

Now they had nothing. In his pocket was the turn-off notice from Con Edison. Within days they would cut his electricity and gas. His refrigerator was empty. If not for the magnanimity of his friend Joe, whose diner wasn't exactly doing a roaring trade, Chris would not be dying of the syndrome— but of starvation.

Vincent winced as he pictured the boy, eight years his junior at nineteen, almost bedridden now, his body emaciated by AIDS and countless opportunistic infections, as one by one the antiviral drugs failed. It was like reliving his parents' death. Ironically, his hypothesis, the best hope, existed only on paper. And after tonight's debacle he could think of no outfit on earth that would be prepared to invest a fortune in his idea.

Except . . . the one represented by this man.

But Christ, that would be like selling my soul to the devil.

All because of that bastard Professor Emil Sarty of the CDC. The great cardinal of medical science, robed in authority, whose voice had boomed across the auditorium posing the questions that would seal Vincent's fate.

"Dr Bach, has your team run any primate studies to support the hypothesis?"

Vincent tried to avoid the question of animal studies, "Actually, Professor, there's been no team," he'd said. Technically, of course, there'd been thousands, only they hadn't known it. His CyberPatient, or e-human, required the kind of computational

power and speed in excess of a thousand teraflops, currently impossible. So he'd enlisted the spare processing power of thousands of anonymous computer users over the Internet, including the Department of Defense and NASA. It was at this point that he silently chided himself. Realizing now that he should have followed his instincts. Should have prepped this audience better for a premise this radical, this . . . different. But a part of him believed the world had changed. That the twenty-first century had become the era of revolutionary medicine. That nothing, however extraordinary, fazed even the man on the street.

"Dr Bach?" Sarty pressed.

Vincent cleared his throat. "Er, no, there have been no animal studies."

My e-human eliminated the need for animal cruelty, he wanted to say. But a chorus of gasps reminded him he was going too far too quickly with these scientists who appeared parochial and steeped in the present. Quickly, he added that this was just a working hypothesis. He explained that his simulation programs rendered vivisection obsolete. The Virtual Intelligence CyberHuman Applications Program replicates the human in cyberspace. The Virion Dynamics Program is the virtual virus—

But Sarty had interjected again, reading aloud the title of Vincent's paper: "*Eradication of HIV from Human Tissue*. You stand before the world claiming to have found the cure for AIDS. And that without any primate studies to support your premise, no scientific team and some kind of a computer simulation game." He laughed a slow, mocking laugh then said, "I think you're in the wrong place, young man. Hollywood is that way. But do take a plane. You'll never get there by simulation!"

Vincent had put up a hand. "No. Wait. Please. The details are included—" But his voice was lost in the rumble as Sarty and his hangers-on got up to leave. Vincent tapped the mike. "Professor, please, it's all there in your copies. I've referenced the

precedents for simulated studies. My protocols are based on sound scientific principles. I've followed the Harvard Protocol on Simula—" He'd gone on, talking faster, until the last member of the audience had left, the last echo of laughter had floated away.

Vincent's humiliation had been palpable. Sarty's derision made him painfully aware of how different he was from the rest of these academics. He became self-conscious of his appearance. Dressed in jeans, sneakers, a black leather jacket, his long dark hair in a ponytail, his tall form slumped over the podium in despair—

A strange voice jerked Vincent into the present.

He did a double take when an opaque partition slid open in front of him and the countenance of a one-eyed stranger materialized from the blackness.

2

VINCENT'S STARE WAS reciprocated by the small stout one-eyed man whose bald, burnished walnut of a head gleamed above a thick bushy unibrow. His left eye was covered by a silk eye-patch. A pencil thin mustache underscored his aquiline nose. He was short—nearly a midget and despite the absence of a beard and wax-smooth skin, he resembled a pint-sized pirate. Danny DeVito under the Jolly Roger.

"It's rude, Dr Bach."

"Huh?"

"You're staring." The voice was reedy, shrill, yet cool, assured. Vincent started to reply, but the man extended his hand. "Edward Styles."

Vincent did likewise, nodding. "I'm sor—"

Styles waved it away. "Well, I'm not exactly Brad Pitt, am I? And you're a man under pressure. What with losing your prestigious position at Grant-Sinclair—and all because of an obsession that just got you booed before the world. A gold nugget for all your thoughts just now."

Vincent sighed. This was turning out to be one strange night.

"You didn't return any of my calls, Dr Bach. That didn't seem very polite, did it? I called the moment I read your proposal to the scientific committee. If we'd done business then, I could have saved you this humiliation. And the certainty of never being taken seriously as a scientist again. Anyway, Michael and Hans saved you from a real mauling out there, didn't they?" He gave a suppressed chortle then gestured out the window with disdain. "The press. Salivating wolves. And Sarty and his cronies—bigots,

conspirators, not in our league.”

Vincent shook his head. “It was just bad prep. I was naïve. Didn’t think to warm them up to my ideas. I talk too fast. I think too fast. I leave people behind. It’s . . . it’s just the way I’ve always been—”

“Yeah, like in high school, aged 11, when the faculty thought your Living Computer Project for the science fair— software code written with DNA—was a prank. Together with your hypothesis about the Cellular Computer Processor, they rejected it. Then Professor Ginsberg of Harvard discovers it on your blog, invites you to deliver a lecture to his Masters class. The media goes wild. This is followed by an invite to MIT, which you turn down, because, even then, you couldn’t stand the limelight, hated photographs of yourself. Am I right?”

Styles shrugged off Vincent’s surprise and continued. “So, it *is* about being well-prepared. But tonight that wasn’t your problem. Whatever Sarty and the rest needed to know, to believe, was all there in your paper. It’s just that they run the kind of politics you’d never comprehend. Those old academics at Harvard and MIT really marveled at the child prodigy, didn’t they? Only now you’re all grown up and kicking ass on their turf. Welcome to the real world, kid.” Styles turned to the Sam Elliott clone, who’d introduced himself as Mike Moran. “Your manners, Michael?”

The aide immediately opened a bar fridge and smiled at Vincent, the salt and pepper mustache bristling like a porcupine. “Your pleasure, Doc?”

“A Bud’ll be just fine, thanks.”

There you go. Vincent pressed the chilled beer bottle to the rising heat in his face. Despite himself, the ‘business’ was being done. He was drinking with the devil. Involuntarily he stiffened as his mental search engines began probing his brain. Text, images of his potential bedfellow flashed. He selected the pertinent info about Styles—

Like the “Babies for Sale” story in Africa. A company, AfriGen in Zambia had been indicted for cloning babies for sale to wealthy childless couples through the international black market. AfriGen was thought to be a Sloane-Wright subsidiary set up to circumvent the Stateside ban on cloning. Shortly after the indictment, a fire razed the facility, killing forty-five people including twelve American scientists resident there. In a single stroke Sloane-Wright had destroyed any evidence that could taint their reputation and emerged from yet another controversy unscathed.

Rumors abounded that the company often sidetracked established protocol to fast-track product entry into the global market. Not least of Styles’ problems was the AsthEze fiasco. The lawsuits against Sloane-Wright’s errant asthma therapy were taxing company reserves, making Styles just as desperate as him.

As his mind hummed on Vincent became aware of Styles holding up a bound copy of his hypothesis. “Now here’s a bestseller, wouldn’t you say? Killing a real virus with a DNA antivirus program, just like computers. Ingenius!”

But Vincent wasn’t listening. Instead, looking out the window, he noticed they’d gone left down 34th Street and were now cruising past the bright windows of Macy’s between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. He remembered coming here shopping with his mother, Saturday mornings, before Chris was born. He adored the odor of new fabric, crisp material sparking with static, as he played among the racks while his mother tried on fancy clothes she’d rarely ever buy. She’d bring him into the city every weekend while his father was busy at Bellevue, performing trauma surgery six days out of seven, saving lives with every cut— until the day a scalpel slipped, sliced through gloves, broke open his father’s skin, violating the flimsy barrier between life and oblivion.

One drop of blood turning their lives into an ocean of pain.

He noticed his reflection in the window, the long hair, the prominent nose and

cheekbones, the dark eyes, the cleft in his chin. So much like his father now. . .

“Fox News is already calling it the New York *Hype-Pothesis*!” Styles grinned, a surfeit of gold dental work winking in passing neon. “Five minutes after the walkout, it made ‘Play of the Day’ for the event, on CNN.” He chortled. “‘21st Century da Vinci Burned at the Stake’ was the breaking news headline. You’ve probably given the *Times* and *Post* their highest circulation figures for this quarter. Copies’ll be flying off the stands. Yeah . . .” He nodded slowly. “It’s all a joke to them. It’s the way of the world. They’ll never see you as one of them. Not only are you light-years ahead. You’re a half-blood. Like me. But you know that don’t you?”

Vincent tried to ignore the comment. But felt the resonating insult and humiliation of the walkout return. Because his father, a prominent surgeon, had married an old-world woman, half Iroquios, half Irish, they’d always been different, always on the fringe. His gift had only made it worse, making the family appear as freaks. Taking a long swig from the bottle, he glared at Styles, loathing all he stood for, hurt it was Styles lauding his work instead of others whose admiration he sought. Yet, regardless of how much revulsion he felt, how strongly his moral compass directed him elsewhere, he realized he was trapped in this crucible with Styles. If there was an escape from what now appeared to be a done deal, even he was unable to figure it.

Still, he seethed. Suddenly the anger he’d felt earlier in the auditorium rushed at him. This wasn’t the way it should be. He recoiled against his seat.

“And what the fuck is it to you, Mr Styles?”

The slices of the Bach sandwich reacted instantly. Hans got him by the throat, Moran elbowed him in the gut. But the boss yelled, “No,” and waved his men at ease without, for a nanosecond, unlocking his gaze from his young guest.

Vincent coughed, struggled to breathe for a while. His ears thrummed. An

uncontrollable thing began building inside of him. The atmosphere drained of pressure, the ambient air growing rarefied and still, tempting a storm.

Styles laughed—a sudden eerie cackle that ended as quickly as it had begun. There was almost a leprechaun-like mischief exuding from his mannerisms which didn't hide an underlying menace that frightened the young scientist. Styles leaned far forward now, all intensity and earnestness, slipping to the edge of his high seat. Vincent sank deeper into his. The gaze of his host suddenly froze the air between them.

"I don't suffer fools gladly, my young friend." Styles' voice barely rose from the whisper but its pitch was half an octave lower than its amusing throaty countertenor. "Nor do I pass by the work of unrivaled intellect without pausing to explore the realm of its potential. Your very presence before me is the answer. Can you not see?"

"You wanted fame but got notoriety instead. Genius turned pariah. Well, welcome to the club. You and I are the same. It's why we're doing business together."

Vincent shivered. He had a sense of waking into an illusion, his host's voice reaching him from some phantasm in the vast and bleak wilderness of a dream.

"You and I know why this is so important. You know the truth they're hiding, don't you?"

Vincent frowned at first then barely nodded. *The truth*. A secret residing in the cryptic vaults of cyberspace, beyond secured digital gates accessed only by his wizardry. Sarty and other CDC and WHO brass were keeping the devastating news about HIV and AIDS from the world. Vincent had stumbled upon the secret while researching his own work, hacking into WHO and CDC sites, ever mindful of the limits of his intrusions. He perused, "listened in", as in a library, or with his telescope, browsing the treasures of other worlds. In the heart of Africa medical workers had begun finding terrifying mutants of HIV. One of the strains, though extremely rare, had the potential to

break what was termed the Apocalypse Threshold. For years scientists on the Global AIDS Watch had scanned the world for the secretly hypothesized HIV superstrain that could prove unstoppable and threaten the human species. It was a natural evolutionary process with microbes. That strain had now found its way into the US.

“It was inevitable?” Styles said, as though reading his mind. “And as we speak, the strain in Africa gains momentum in its strides towards the calamity.”

Vincent nodded absently as he recalled what he’d seen on those websites. The CDC guys were referring to it as a chimera that had first appeared in the DRC. Somehow, through a cascade of evolutionary events in hosts carrying more than one virus—Ebola, HIV, influenza— HIV had acquired the characteristics of these easily transmissible and lethal viruses.

Regarding the effects of this superstrain, there were prediction graphs of a global AIDS superpandemic so way off the scales he battled to believe them. Human deaths in the tens of millions were expected. Following these were memos from government brass, fear and urgency dripping from text termed “Classified”. It felt like peeking over the event horizon of a black hole, seeing things no other ordinary soul had ever seen.

SuperAIDS. Plague of plagues. The apocalypse scenario had shifted from hypothesis to reality. And they’d kept it a secret.

Again it felt like Styles entered his mind as he said, “Their reasons for secrecy might be borne of noble intentions—to prevent global hysteria. This isn’t some terrorist threat to an oilfield. It’s about decimated workforces, ruined governments, global economies in tailspin. And we need to do everything in our power to stop that. It’s not a job. It’s a call to action.

“But more importantly, it’s about love and loss. I know about your parents, your brother Christian, I know your pain as I know my own. We need this cure.”

Tears welled in Vincent's eyes. How he'd long to hear words such as these in the auditorium. The truth, the pledge to seek every avenue, however unconventional, in battling this lethal tide against humanity.

He recalled his mother's wish as Styles' voice came in warm waves, strangely comforting now.

"When God in the Great Firmament plays a hand . . . He deals life into a species. Then withdraws, leaving creation to bloom or decay for His callous pleasure."

Pausing, he made a circular gesture with thumb and forefinger. "We're all teetering on the brink of extinction, here. Billions awaiting a singular fate. And if we thought we'd won the microbe war with antibiotics and vaccines, think again. This thing destroys the very system that ensures human survival. This syndrome is about to precipitate a calamity of biblical proportions."

Raising the manuscript again, Styles declared, "But with this spawning of your genius, so ridiculed this night, the world will be on its knees before us, governments tearing for the dotted line . . . and you and I . . . we can play the Hand of God."

3

Dr Susan Conner, Martha Flowers Sanitarium, Boston

March 2007

DR SAMUEL CHANDERPAUL, with buzz-cut silver hair and white jacket over scrubs, sat in the chair opposite her, while on either side, at her shoulders, stood two burly female orderlies. The big women were alert and agile despite their size and accustomed to dealing with the extreme behavior of patients incarcerated in this wing.

High above them in the small padded cell, beyond reach, were barred windows too narrow even for a child to crawl through. Midday sunlight slanting in, ricocheted off the walls then filtered down through rising dust motes onto the occupants.

The psychiatrist crossed his legs, nodded at the orderlies and observed their slow ritual of unfastening Dr Susan Conner's straightjacket.

For a while she remained unmoving, indifferent, her gaze locked on the gleam of the psychiatrist's wristwatch. Almost a lack of affect, he thought. Most likely the residual effects of all the meds pumped into her. Her head hung low, a string of saliva stretching from lips to chest. She didn't blink. Until the wristwatch moved. Then she brought a hand to her neck, her fingers tracing the fresh scar that shone silvery-red from ear-to-ear. Another blink and she began to wake, to rouse from a reverie.

She gripped the sides of the chair first and pushed down hard. When that didn't work she grunted, whipped her head back and forth and flailed her arms before trying to rip the flimsy shift of a gown from her body. Color bloomed in her pallid face. Veins bulged at her temples. She stamped her feet on the floor. Still, she couldn't stand on

account of the strap pulled across her lap and fixed to the immovable chair.

The orderlies pinned her arms and legs by now, their own limbs strained against a patient half their weight.

“Get the hell away from me!” She stretched her neck, tried to bite them. “Don’t touch me, bitches. Let me out of here. O God, let me out of here!”

They dug in, thick fingers imprinting red blotches on pale flesh. One of them held her head. The other gripped her wrists until she stopped fighting, her breathing slowed, came in rasps and she assumed the hopeless look again.

Dr Chanderpaul leaned forward, let his clipboard fall. “Dr Conner . . . Susan, look at me. You have got to stop this. You have to stay calm. Please. Otherwise this isn’t going to work.”

She looked at him without moving, her glare from the shadows of her damp, matted blond hair. Her chest rose and fell, her breasts pressing against the fabric of the gown. “Calm?” she whispered. “How . . . when they keep me locked in here, tied up like an animal? Dear God, I’m a mother. A wife. I- I need to get my baby. My Nate.” She looked at his wristwatch again. “How can they keep me here when I need to fetch him from kindergarten, take him home.” She raised her head, her eyes red ringed, the lids puffy. “Tell them, Sam. Please. You know me. Please tell them.”

The psychiatrist smiled, picked up his clipboard and made some notes. He tilted his head. “Yes. I know you, Susan. You are loved and admired. A brilliant infectious diseases specialist—a colleague too valuable to lose. So, in time, I will tell them. I promise. But for now, it’s for your own good. All this.” He paused, gestured expansively at the pale-green walls, the rubberized chair. “You’ve got to understand, though that you’re ill, you need care and treatment. And we’re doing the best we can.”

Susan snapped her head from side to side. “No. No, this isn’t right. You have to

let me go home. I can take care of myself. And Robert, he can take care of me.”

The psychiatrist sighed. He exchanged a meaningful glance with the senior orderly then looked at his patient. “Susan. Listen to me. It’s still too soon. You can’t take care of yourself. A patient of yours died in your care, because of your negli—” He stopped, took a breath. “A young patient died because you were too sick to do your best. And you wouldn’t admit it. Do you recall that?”

She shook her head.

“After they checked you in here, you tried to end your life three times already. Tell me, do you remember any of it?”

Susan said nothing. She looked away.

“So this is for your own safety, to prevent you from hurting yourself again. Susan? Look at me. Please. Besides severe depression, you’re suffering from post traumatic stress. What happened to your family. . . no one can just get up and walk away from that kind of trauma. Not even you.” He leaned forward. “Tell me, do you remember why you were brought here?”

Susan didn’t respond. She began to jiggle her knees, gnash her teeth.

“To begin the process of healing, you’ve got to accept the loss you suffered. You’ve got to grieve. That process takes time, but it’s essential, the first step. Only then can we let you go home, resume your career, make a new life for yourself. First you’ve got to accept that Robert and Nate are no longer with us. That they . . . are . . . Do you understand what I’m saying . . . ?” He lowered his voice. “Your husband and child . . . are dead.”

Susan looked up. Her eyes brimmed. She wrung her hands. She started to wail.

4

Edward Alderon Styles, Sloane Wright Biotech, Manhattan

October 2008

IN HIS VAST twentieth-floor office, Styles pondered the latest online reports from his local and international SW500 trials venues and considered the great questions of life.

And death, he thought, as remorse clouded his face.

“If you killed a thousand people to save ten million,” he asked himself, “Would those killings be justified?” *In war, certainly. But was the fight against a devastating disease a war?* He thought of those he’d had killed and said, “Am I a murderer?”

Styles stared at his huge disproportionate hands, loathing the dangerous power they wielded. The kind of power he’d never deemed possible as a boy growing up dirt poor in the barrios. Approaching the massive floor to ceiling windows overlooking the great city from which he’d carved his power, Styles sighed. Steady dismal rain rendered the distant Hudson and New Jersey shoreline into a melancholic watercolor awash with the gray hues of a morose cityscape. He shook his head. This day, even the city appeared to reflect his misery.

His office scheme did little to lift the mood either. Its décor, in stark contrast to the ultramodern theme of the building, was a mixture of Gothic and classical styles. The walls were appointed in exotic timber rising from a gray marble floor. The ornate ceiling had been worked with elaborately carved cornices of a dark medieval wood. There were gilded moldings, stained-oak rosettes, brass architraves, and paintings with intricately carved frames.

Never one to speak to himself, Styles considered these recent lapses conversations with God as he tried to solve the major problems he'd been facing of late.

Returning to his great mahogany desk, the frown on his brow deepened. *Another day, another list of troubles*, he thought, apropos the reports on the screen.

Just over two years ago, Sloane-Wright had been riding high on the success of their decades-old Asthma drug AsthEze. Then, a series of billion-dollar class action lawsuits against the company (ironically, because of AsthEze attributed deaths) had threatened the firm's coffers, caused soaring stocks to plunge and left it facing ruin.

But Styles' never-say-die spirit had led him to something even greater: Vincent Bach. It wasn't serendipity. His quest for the next miracle drug was relentless. He scoured the international research arena, his scouts panning publications, biolabs, conferences, for the mother-lode. Ultimately it was a question of numbers. Now, with SW500 in the final stages of clinical trials, on the brink of FDA approval, it was only a matter of time before *he* and *Sloane-Wright* rode international success once again.

That is, of course, just as soon as he took care of the gremlins that kept popping up to threaten the success of the program. They were actually humans. *Martyrs, really*. Taking care of the initial ones had been the hardest for him. First was Dr Melnick. Recently he'd given the order for Dr Harvey Leland. Now he had been made aware of two new menaces—Dr Jason Wells and Dr Susan Conner. The patients posed no risk. Deserted by friends and family, feared by society for their disease, they were never missed. Killing the doctors however, was a perilous business he wished to avoid.

He remained baffled about these few recalcitrant doctors on the trials team. *Couldn't they see that without SW500 neither they nor any other soul would be safe from a virus that had found humankind's Achilles heel?*

Already the HIV superbug was establishing itself in the US while the third world

reeled. The real global death toll from AIDS—not the official stats—was nearly a hundred million with the same number infected. No surprises there, especially the way things were going in Africa. Thousands of infected illegal aliens from the DRC and Zimbabwe, swarmed into South Africa daily. Almost fifty-six million of the eighty million global AIDS victims lived in Sub-Saharan Africa. Daily, eleven thousand people got AIDS, while another eight to ten thousand died of the syndrome. South Africa had the highest incidence of AIDS with a quarter of the population HIV positive.

It was a matter of time before evolution brought what virologists hypothesized as “the apocalypse scenario”—medicine’s answer to nuclear fission. A ticking global time-bomb hidden in the shadow of headlines abounding with Mideast conflict, nuclear proliferation and the War Against Terror. The three-decade-old pandemic had become so commonplace it had lost its newsworthiness. As it quietly decimated populations, his drug would make him the savior to a shell-shocked desperate world.

Which is why many more had to die.

Styles crossed himself. “Like those that fought the crusades for the sake of faith and the greater good, I have to be strong or I am no soldier worth a damn.”

And then there was Gina. He pictured his daughter’s flowing black hair, her dark eyes. Gina, who at 19, would waste away into oblivion if the miracle didn’t see the light of day. No one was safe from this plague. Not he, nor his family. No, he determined, nothing could hold SW500 back.

He turned to his intercom. “Let me know the instant the men arrive, Ariana,”

The men. Michael Moran Sloane-Wright’s head of security, Hans Madlener, Moran’s lieutenant, Dr Dwight Poole. Professor Carl Bentley who was director of the clinical trials at NYU was another, though reluctant member of this alliance. These were the footsoldiers who directly or indirectly killed for him. *A far cry from the time I’d*

killed with my own hands. Styles immediately gazed with contrition across the office to an alcove hidden from plain view. He tried vainly to block the memories by concentrating on the figures in there.

The alcove contained his shrine, a sacred part of his childhood carried over into adulthood. On a pedestal stood a four-foot crucifix behind which hung an oil painting of the Madonna. It was a gift from his mother, a devout Mexican migrant worker who'd arrived in the States three years before baby Edwardo Alderone was born. At the diner where she'd worked in El Paso, was a short order cook called Styles with whom she'd fallen in love. She'd moved in with her lover and was happy, but three months after the baby came, the short order cook with a penchant for Latinas took off. The child and his destitute mother moved from barrio to barrio after that, one city to another, looking for work and a place to call home. They eventually found that in the Bronx.

Earlier that morning, Styles had visited the shrine. Genuflecting, he'd crossed himself. "Forgive me father for I have sinned," he'd begun, before making his confession in silence, a thing between him and the Lord. *I do what I do for the greater good of my fellow man*. The confession over, he removed a pen from his jacket and wrote a numerical value on a piece of paper, lit a candle and placed the offering before the effigy. He gazed endearingly into its lifelike eyes. "This for the needy, in Your Name, I promise," he whispered. "Help me, Father, as you always do. The power of Your Hand is close." He'd faltered, dropped his gaze before resuming. "But just as I feel it, I feel trouble too. I beg you do not taunt me. Do not take it back."

He began whispering names as though reciting the rosary, ". . . Dr Melnick, Harvey Leland, Jason Wells, Susan Conner . . ." He looked up into the cold eyes of the crucifix. ". . . with their deaths, millions more shall live."

5

OUT OF NECESSITY and painful experience, Styles' brand of Catholicism excluded intermediaries. The last time he'd been to church, he'd been driven there by remorse, deep guilt and terrible fear of eternal damnation. It was a week after he'd killed his best friend Ramon Alvarez, only days after graduating high School in the Bronx. It was the same day he'd slain Father O'Malley, the parish priest— these horrible events, accidents, precipitated by his unrequited love for the beautiful Corinne Mendoza.

She was the girl with the gleaming jet black hair and hazel eyes whose quick smile made his heart beat faster way back in the fourth grade. The one he'd worshipped through high school—offering to carry her books, open doors, pay her compliments. She'd throw back her hair and giggle, "How quaint. You're a sweet guy, you know."

"But sweet don't win you no booty," Ramon snorted. "Show her how you feel, Eddie. That way you get into her pants, demonstrate your sweet moves, you know."

"She's not that kinda girl Ramon. Anyway, it's not the right time."

The real reasons were his abject fear of rejection and ridicule. Guys like him had to win the world before they could walk away with a girl like Corinne. Ever since grade school he was the odd one out, the "hobbit", the midget. "Yo, weirdo, Quasimodo/ Checkout Mr Frodo." Kids on the playground barred him from their groups, jeering and taunting him because he was different—his dark moon face and flat nose, his ragged clothes and sparse scraggly hair.

It was no different from the way his father had rejected them, leaving his unschooled immigrant mother to face the harsh world alone with a kid. And it certainly was no different from the way his best friend Ramon Alvarez had betrayed him by

fornicating with his beloved Corinne in the last days of their high school life.

Seeking refuge in the school gym from the cruelty on the field, boxing and wrestling soon became an obsession that turned young Style's strength and agility into a formidable thing for one of such small stature.

The night he'd taken Ramon's life, they were on their way home from Sullivan's Gym where Styles regularly sparred while Ramon played basketball in the adjacent hall. It had been a week since their senior prom, which Styles hadn't attended.

All evening the guys around the ring were making jibes:

"Hey Eddie, you may be fast in the ring, but you ain't that fast gettin to first base with yo girl, man."

"Maybe you should bring that Ramon backstabber here, you know. Take him a few rounds in the ring, he makeout with your girl after the prom."

Styles had already heard how Ramon had taken Corinne to a seedy motel. Now, as he and Ramon walked by an alley off East Tremont Avenue, near River Parkway, he battled to keep the horrible images out of his head.

Corinne trembling, taking off her clothes in a dinghy room, Ramon fidgeting with his hard-on, ogling Corinne's breasts.

He grabbed Ramon's arm. "Why the fuck did you do it, Ramon? You're my best friend for God's sake!"

Ramon stared, his mouth agape, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, Eddie. I-I didn't know how to tell you, man It just happened, you know. I didn't know I had feelings . . ."

Corinne's nubile, naked body, whimpering under Ramon . . .

Jesus. Styles shuddered, sick. In his mind, at least, Corinne was still the virginal figure of his childhood. And this was the ultimate betrayal.

To this day he could feel the shame of his tears, his explosive rage. His powerful

body had contracted, his fist, a club smashing against Ramon's face, crunching bone. After that there was nothing but the bright red halo inside his eyes, like a painful memory flash. And when it passed, his best friend lay in a widening pool of blood.

Blood poured down Styles' face too, and something was wrong with the way he was seeing things. Reaching for his left eye, he vomited. His fingers went through the socket into the hot sticky softness where his eyelids had fallen inward. Instinctively, he wiped Ramon's bloody fingers with his gym towel and crossed himself. Then flagged down a police cruiser. Recognizing one of the cops from the Barrio, Pepe Marquez, who knew his mother well, who fancied her, he knew, Styles crossed himself again. Gave silent thanks for the gift. They'd been mugged, he claimed, attacked by thugs. In trying to save his friend, he'd bloodied himself. He hadn't planned deception, but somehow his survival instinct kicked in. Everyone believed him, the cops (thanks largely to Pepe Marquez), his Mama, Ramon's widowed mother . . .

But guilt and his faith had led him to confessional, to Father O'Malley . . . *Old, stooped Father O'Malley, whose wiry white eyebrows and dark eyes still shine through the ornate grating between them in his nightmares. Stunned Father O'Malley who'd baptized Ramon as a child; who mutters repeatedly after young Style's confession: "O Dear Lord, O Dear Lord"; treacherous Father O'Malley who forgets penance and staggers out of the booth and walks to his office in back of the church and picks up the phone to call the cops—all of this watched by the young, fearful Styles who can't believe a priest could break the code. "No wait, Father, please," Styles begs even as he reaches for the brass letter opener that lay like a sword on the desk, plunges it into the priest's heart and watches the old man slump to the ground.*

The squawk of Styles' intercom brought him back. The men had arrived.

Styles nodded at each one in turn, Michael Moran with the mustache, the silent,

hulking blond Hans and the mousy, but eerie Dr Dwight Poole, Deputy Director of the SW500 clinical trials team at NYU Medical Center's Clinical Research Unit.

Styles ushered them to the glass-walled conference area adjoining his office where a quartet of wirelessly networked notebook computers awaited them.

Taking his own seat at the head of the table, Styles clicked open a series of encrypted files that each of the men could view on their screens.

As always in these meetings Styles dispensed with formalities.

"As you are aware, gentlemen, our situation continues. Dr. Poole, I trust you've already updated Michael on the latest scenario at the CRU."

"In detail, up until an hour ago, Sir."

Moran cleared his throat. "We're in constant contact. Just to recap—we're still experiencing SW500 glitches here in Manhattan and in San Francisco. These are being taken care of according to plan. No hiccups on my side, Boss."

Styles nodded his approval but a frown creased his otherwise waxy forehead.

"Wish we could say the same for things abroad. As you know, we've staged the international phase of the trials in a staggered pattern, targeting regions with the highest incidence of AIDS—India three months pre- US, then Africa, then Thailand and so on. This may just prove our salvation. Situations in one location would signal possible events elsewhere so we can take preemptive action and smooth the path to eventual FDA approval." Styles gestured at the screens. "See for yourselves."

By the time they were finished, Dr Dwight Poole's face was drawn. Sweat shimmered on his upper lip. Moran and Hans were expressionless.

"Manhattan has begun to mirror the negative trend we're seeing internationally. As I've said, there's time to act, one facility at a time. Locally, we're on track. We'll be ready for the FDA in three months. Which is all we need."

Moran cleared his throat. "Uh huh. Global Village, Boss. Distance and time are illusions. We need to act now, as you said, preemptively. Yeah, in three months we're FDA-licensed and ready to market. But our assets abroad could turn into liabilities. If the press comes asniffing they'll dig it all up and trace it back to this room."

The domino effect, Styles thought.

Moran's Texan drawl went on. "We have to channel some resources there, activate the sleeper immediately. Gonna be our biggest market, so we can't allow a leak there to set off the media hounds. Just say the word, Boss"

Styles stared silently at the computer screen for several seconds before walking over to the windows overlooking the river. He hoped it would never come to this elsewhere. Locally they had the Pro cleaning things up. *Activating the sleeper in India*, would unleash another torrent on his conscience. He sighed. Life was a mirror of the pharmaceutical industry. Cure one ailment and cause ten others. Styles looked at his hands and for a moment, saw Ramon's blood smeared there. He shrugged off the images in disgust and crossed himself beyond the view of the others.

"All right, Michael," he said without turning. "Whatever you have to do. Here and abroad." Under his breath he muttered, "Yeah, whatever it takes. As long as Sloane-Wright lives, the world has hope."

6

DR HARVEY LELAND had never known terror such as this.

After all, he was just a medical scientist seeking the truth. He wasn't savvy to the workings of those he'd come to refer to as the Big Pharma Mafia. Which is why the blinding lights in the rearview mirror of his silver Porsche were a torment to him.

They meant death.

They were relentless. And they'd been there ever since he'd left his lover, Eileen Griffiths' apartment ten minutes ago.

He knew them by now— despite traffic— the dark hulk of the black Blazer like an evil shadow, looming. The car's air-conditioning whirled on max, but the sweat clung like mucus to his skin. And he just couldn't keep from shaking. His Porsche sped up Amsterdam Avenue until he slammed on the brake and clutch simultaneously, thrust the stick into second and cut west into 138th Street at almost ninety degrees, hoping to shake the fuckers on his tail.

All or nothing . . .

He had to make it to Julia Loon's in Harlem. If he didn't make the rendezvous with the FBI there, he was a dead man.

Oh, how his heart brimmed with regret. If only he'd minded his own business, turned away from the heinous truth, he wouldn't be here tonight, trying to stay alive, risking the happiness of those he loved . . . his wife Bernice, his three beautiful girls, and of course, Eileen.

7

The Patient, Manhattan, New York, Friday 1 November 2008

THE BOY WHO'd had AIDS—not the SuperAIDS, for that had yet to hit New York in full force—liked to think he feared nothing. But viruses, well, they were something else. When they jumped your system, gave you the disease, it couldn't be cured. Doctors could immunize you against some, but that's like protecting you against one drop of acid rain in a monsoon. He should know. He'd been infected with HIV once, the virus that tricked your genes, became a part of you so it couldn't be destroyed, while it totally destroyed you. But he'd beaten it, cheated death, and strode away like some immortal.

Pretty much nothing scared him after that.

Except this. The thing that was happening right now . . .

Growing up in the projects, he'd seen it all. But the dude stalking him was different—like he didn't care if you knew—a zombie from a horror movie.

It was one of those special fall days: Cobalt sky, crisp air, icy gusts from alleyways. Store windows brimmed with autumnal cornucopias, worlds beyond his. In the South Bronx, in the shadow of concrete and desolation, he'd come to hate stone. But this city was cool how it pulsed, breathed life into things. *Had breathed life into him.*

He'd been making the same route for more than a year now, on his way to the hospital for his twice weekly dose of SW500. A ritual that kept him alive. A ritual he loved. Not today, though. Not with this weirdo on his tail.

Stopping by the computer store window on the corner of Park Avenue and 33rd, he feigned gawking at the cool new hardware while checking reflections in the glass. And, sure enough, the phantom with the upmarket duds was there. He took a deep

breath and let it out slowly, carefully. The skin on his arms and back crawled, gooseflesh rising like a thousand pinpoint sensors on alert.

Turning quickly, he pushed on. Rounding the corner onto East 34th Street, he passed the Murray Hill Cinemas, his pace much faster now. But when he glimpsed back the dude was almost on him, an unnerving lopsided grin snaking its way across his lips.

The boy caught his breath, sputtered, his chest hurting badly now.

Only a few blocks to go before he'd be safe, surrounded by people he knew—

—whom he could count on to protect him. Like Big Burt at the entrance, Nurse Eileen Griffiths and Dr Susan Conner, new member on the trials team who'd turned the eerie CRU into a sanctuary for him. Yeah, she was cool, mysterious too, the way she hid her green eyes behind those dorky glasses, which, incidentally, didn't look real—

The boy began to wheeze. The air grew thin, treacherous, the icy ground like splinters where his worn soles met concrete. He doubled over, coughing, his heart punching like a Tyson combination against his chest. *Shit*. He might have conquered death, but he was still weak, his body not half way down the long haul back to health.

Passing by the St Vartan Cathedral at the corner of 34th and Second he silently prayed. Then, reaching the edge of the curb on First Avenue smiling at his destination just across the street, he felt a slight shove against the small of his back.

Traffic was heavy, sirens screaming near emergency rooms. The blue and white bus with the huge M for a nose and the goofy face was bearing down hard, its rumble on the asphalt rising to the pit of his stomach. It was large as the sky in his eyes, when he felt another shove and lost his balance, went sprawling into the street.



Dr Susan Conner, Manhattan, Tuesday 19 November 2008

SHE AWOKE WITH a start.

Somewhere in her darkness a phone was ringing incessantly. She reached across the nightstand and lifted the receiver. "Hello?"

"Dr Conner?" an elderly female voice said. "Oh dear, you're still in bed?"

She studied the room. *Where the hell am I?* Slits of light escaping the edges of her drapes caught the white-petaled petunias by the window, an antique walnut bureau, medical tomes brimming over sagging shelves. The digital clock by her bedside—

A frisson— *Dear God, what have I forgotten this time?*

And then it came to her—Professor Bentley's urgent memo after late rounds last evening: "In my office. 8:00 AM sharp!" it had demanded without preamble.

It was 7:55 AM now. Even on her bike at full throttle, she'd never make it.

". . . Dr Conner? You there?"

Susan covered the mouthpiece, cleared her throat. "Yes . . . yes. I'm sor—"

"Well, you'd better get here before all hell breaks loose. Something's wrong."

The voice fell to a whisper. "Chief's out here in person, pacing, looking something furious." There was a pause. "And dear, happy birthday, many happy returns."

Rising quickly, Susan drew the drapes and shrank from sunlight. She clutched the dresser as a bout of dizziness passed through her. Then surveyed her landscape of ruin: the unmade bed, littered nightstand— empty wine bottles, blister packs of Vicodin, Xanax, used syringes, empty narcotics vials. On her walls and furniture, like a madman's handiwork, were Post It notes with scribbled entries. Reminders,

recollections. She noticed she was still in yesterday's work clothes— formless gray slacks, cream silk blouse. *At least I'm already dressed*, she wryly thought, reached for a handful of pills and swallowed them dry.

In the mirror, she avoided her eyes which had become dark bruises circled by worry. A dull green now, they were sunken in their orbits accentuating her high cheekbones, her sallow, oval face. Her lips appeared pale, parched.

Gathering her disheveled shoulder length blond hair, she swiftly pulled the locks into a severe bun, slipped on a pair of thick-rimmed glasses with their fake, non-prescription lenses. Together with the unremarkable, off-the-rack clothes, the bun, they were part of a disguise she'd assumed since leaving the city of her birth. A mirthless smile appeared on her face as she regarded her reflection.

There, that should hide it all. She shrugged into her leather riding jacket, started to leave when her attention snagged on the lone photograph on the dresser.

"And once they were three," she whispered, looking at the beaming faces—her five-year-old son Nate, husband Robert, and she against the shimmering backdrop of the Charles River. In the two-year-old photograph she appeared far younger than her thirty-two years. Her tanned face was unlined, her green eyes lucid and joyful, her long hair glowing. *Ambushed once again*, she thought, as tears spilled.

She leaned low and kissed the images of a family buried back in Boston, a city she'd fled for this new life, this new career. Her eyes lingered over the child, the man.

Oh, Robert, if only you knew how hard this was. Even here, trouble follows me like a curse. First, Daddy; then our family, now me . . . the hospital . . .

She scanned the Post It notes, her eyes returning to the photo and beside it the spiral notebook with entries she'd made the previous night, trying to order her thoughts, find something concrete to her sense of strange goings on in the hospital's Clinical

Research Unit. Watching the words that stood out repeatedly—SW500 . . . Clinical Trials . . . missing teenager—Tyrone? . . . other missing patients?—she wondered: *Are they real? Or just in my head? Why would patients who depended on a treatment for their survival, simply give up, disappear?*

Her suspicions had become the bane of her life, these days. But where had all this come from to torment her so, especially when all else in her world had gone wrong. *How could all this be?*

This was autumn, the time of year she loved best. Amber days, blue-edged and glowing like Van Gogh sunflowers. The months in New York had finally allowed her to look ahead while the gravity and ill-fortunes of her past faded. Now things had suddenly changed. In the summer she could never have envisioned anything close to this. She'd won a place on Sloane-Wright Biotech's team conducting its latest human trials for a project close to her heart. The experiment, clinical trials for a revolutionary AIDS therapy called SW500, was top secret, but kind of like a CIA mission, she'd reassured herself in good humor— it didn't exist, but it would surely change the world. She felt certain that when it was over, the results would be hailed as the greatest breakthrough in the history of medicine. A medical scientist's dream. So, the world had been her oyster, glory like the perfect pearl. But she couldn't have known how swiftly, inexplicably, the season of death would descend like a storm to ruin her then.

It had begun innocently with her concern for a young trials patient who'd stopped coming in for a treatment keeping him alive. Against her better judgment she'd transgressed strict trials protocol by trying to make contact with him.

But Bentley had warned her, "Just do your job. If you can't follow the rules, Dr Conner, there are others to take your place, who will."

Despite the veiled threat, Susan persisted and found herself before the Chief

again. “As an experienced research physician, you know well enough to keep the personal lives of experimental patients out of the equation. It clouds objectivity. In any case, your rather zealous concern would have been commendable *if* this ‘missing’ patient had existed in the first place.” He noticed her surprise and nodded. “Yes. I checked and found nothing. These are just delusions you’re having. It’s clear you’re still ill. The post traumatic state is not one to be taken lightly. Given your history, your problems back in Boston I shouldn’t’ve given you this position on our SW500 team in the first place.” Bentley had paused to allow the point to sink in. “You were finished back there and you know it. I gave you a lifeline. Abuse it and expect the worst.”

Lifeline, yes, but it was Dr Harvey Leland, her missing colleague and predecessor in the CRU who’d made possible her position on the team. The dashing Mario Van Peebles clone had immediately taken her under his wing. An effusive man with a penchant for sports cars and stylish clothes—someone who never looked like the brilliant scientist and physician he was—had shown her the ropes around the hospital and made her right at home amongst the taciturn group she had to work with.

O God, Harvey, if only you were here to clear the confusion, tell me what the hell’s really going on in the CRU. She shivered as a cold draft past through the room. Her phone rang once again, its caller ID prompting her to quickly turn and head out.

Outside, the parking lot of Riverview Mews, overlooking the Hudson, was icy, empty and eerily quiet. Mounting her old faithful Yamaha bike, Susan glanced over her shoulder and felt an odd sense of predestination.

Under the silent hulking trees, the gnarled red oak darkening the windows of her ground floor apartment, she suddenly felt that all of this, the apartment, her paranoia, her obsession with missing patients— none of it was for real.

9

THROUGH THE GLASS front of Julia Loon's Dr Harvey Leland had seen the dark figures lurking. Like wraiths in the rising steam of the street.

They watched.

They waited.

Well, that's all they could do, for they'd lost, he thought, smiling.

Then the smile suddenly faded as a thought flashed through his mind. These people had killed before. They were trained professionals. And he was just an amateur.

Yet he'd made it this far, hadn't he? A man of books and microscopes, he'd outwitted these professional killers!

Leland was almost hysterical, as he realized how close to death he'd come. Then he laughed out loud, to the consternation of patrons busy with their dinners.

Nodding at the maître d', Leland rushed for the kitchen and the quiet alley beyond.

Here, he'd wait for Special Agent Fielding and his partner to arrive in the unmarked navy Ford Taurus to pick him up, so that he could lead them to the patient files, to the truth and himself to salvation . . .

10

THE UNIVERSITY MEDICAL Center building on First Avenue, next to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner of New York, was staid, unimpressive, uninspiring. However, its institutional facade of pale gray brick and stucco belied the grandeur of its reputation.

That honor and glory was attributed to the Center's latest addition, a fifteen-storey Clinical Research Unit, sponsored by the renowned Sloane-Wright Biotech Corporation. Among its cutting-edge features, the six-year-old wing boasted five subterranean levels for medical bio-containment. The facility enabled research and treatment of the world's deadliest infectious agents and the diseases they caused. Various luminaries had praised the unit's breakthroughs on autoimmune conditions, Alzheimer's and recently the promising new field of nanotech medicine and its application in treatments for incurable conditions such as cancer and AIDS.

For the past eighteen months however, a cloud of silence had descended upon the globally renowned institution. The media had been politely asked to keep its distance, personnel and patients at the CRU had become subject to routine high-tech security screening, and movement throughout the building's maze of chilled corridors was regulated by biometric scanning procedures. The reason for the secrecy was hardly a subject of speculation. For it was widely believed that a nanotech-based group of intelligent antiviral drugs modeled after the once-ridiculed New York Hypothesis posited by Dr Vincent Bach and code-named SW500, was in final-phase testing.

What wasn't known, was the exact nature of the therapy and the true value of its potential. Scientists au fait with the work of Bach— the much derided, maverick

scientist— grudgingly admitted that if the impossible science in his hypothesis could ever be duplicated, the findings would be a great leap for modern medicine. Those in the know, like Edward Styles of Sloane-Wright, simply smiled at this gross underestimation and waited in painful expectation for the day the FDA gave its final nod to their newest product.

MORNING WAS BLUSTERY and windswept when Susan glided from First Avenue into the emergency bay of the hospital. Slotting her beloved motorbike in an illegal zone, she locked her helmet in place and winced as she glanced at her wristwatch.

Though there were bigger problems at hand, she felt a twinge of worry leaving the bike out there. Its value was far in excess of its material worth. Only her second bike since she had to let go of the pink 50 cc baby she'd used at Harvard, the blue Yamaha was her conduit to every memory of Robert, of Nate and her old life before New York.

Entering Virology and Infectious Diseases on the fourth floor, Susan was pleasantly surprised with a birthday wish and card from Maureen, the gray haired, perennially winsome receptionist. Before she could catch her breath Bentley appeared. Without a word, he marched her through the anteroom of his suite, past his grumpy secretary and into his musty inner sanctum. He asked her to sit while he remained standing behind his desk staring down at her. The rope of veins on his forehead pulsed. His facial muscles tautened like rigor.

Gazing up at the man who'd given her what was arguably the most prized position in current medical research, Susan felt a mixture of supreme gratitude and fear. At first glance, there was nothing frightening about him. *Nothing in the physical.* He was about five-ten (compared to her nearly six), upright, in his early fifties. Neither his voice nor physique was extraordinary, but he'd mastered the severe bearing of his

omnipotence in the medical ranks. A penchant for elbow-patched tweed jackets, the shock of wavy brown hair, the Waspy nose, peppered goatee, and half-moon glasses that always dangled from his neck, merged the ingredients for an Oxford Professor. However, the disarming appearance merely belied a sinister vein in his personality that Susan suspected lay like a mother-lode of evil at his core. She shuddered. As Chief of Staff and Director of the SW500 clinical trials project, Bentley was the highest medical authority in the hospital who could advance or ruin careers at will.

Despite her fears, Susan's mind drifted. She thought how weird her fate was. How the stages of her life had become defined by death and propelled by tragedy. Her father's death had motivated her to become a doctor instead of an athlete. The murders back home made her seek this new future in New York. Dr Harvey Leland's mysterious death had created her position within the SW500 trials team and given her the privilege of working in the incredible Clinical Research Unit.

It was where she'd met the now 'missing' teenager, Tyrone. The CRU was a high-tech information vault, a digital island, a futuristic scientific enclave- paperless and pure where experimental patients were numbered subjects, computer files, binary code. Personal interactions were forbidden. Voice loggers and DigiCams chronicled all activity. Biometric checks granted access to a hierarchy of users. Data captured into the omniscient computers passed in a one way stream. Going in, never coming out. Which was why she couldn't find the missing patient or verify his existence in the first place? *Maybe Bentley was right after all—her brain was still screwed up.* She considered her paranoia, the hallucinatory bouts following the murders, the months in psychiatric therapy. Could her mind have retrogressed to that point? Could the missing patients be part of a schizophrenic lapse, an insane dream—

"Dr Conner, GODDAMMIT. Are you listening to me?"

Susan flinched, began to reply, but he continued without pause.

“The others on the team who’ve been here since its inception have never given me the slightest trouble. Whereas you in your first month caused me to fear the success of the entire program! Despite two warnings, you persist with wanton flouting of protocol. What the hell is it with you and this fucking teenager and these so-called missing patients? Jesus, of the hundreds of experimental subjects, even if some have prematurely quit—and I’m not saying any have—what the hell does it matter? We’re months away, poised on the precipice of a new era and instead of ensuring every last detail goes according to plan, I’m busy dealing with your contumacious attitude.”

Bentley turned his steep focus on her and she averted her gaze. “Before giving you this job, I’d read Julian Lawton’s recommendation— the words of my old friend, your former mentor— and I pictured this Harvard star: Loyalty, tenacity, brilliance. But, by God, that glowing testimonial must’ve been written for someone else.” Bentley shook his head. “What the hell’s gotten into you? Despite my leniency, last week you’d harassed team members for information they’re forbidden to share. This, fully aware of the sensitive climate in which we work.” He leaned low, inches from her face. “You claim to be a scientist, but you’re no more than an ungrateful renegade bitch. I’ve placed the world in your fucking hand but all you’re trying to do is screw things up!”

Susan winced at the profanity, thinking to protest, but ingratitude and shame kept her silent. Her incertitude about her own suspicions grew as she studied Bentley’s ego wall behind the desk. There were plaques—certificates, commendations — more than the years she’d been a doctor. Her irrepressible curiosity and concern for patients had become a serious liability to her. Squirming mentally, she had to admit her behavior in recent weeks had been inexcusable.

“We’re in the media spotlight,” The Chief went on. “And your unprofessional

behavior has cast aspersions on the work being done here. You've infuriated Sloane-Wright, our generous benefactors. Anyone would give their right arm for a job you seem hell bent on throwing away with your self-destructive behavior."

Susan nodded, her cheeks searing with embarrassment. She'd always been certain of Bentley's respect. His friendship with her old mentor had stood her in good stead so far. But even that respect had vaporized this morning, and she felt vulnerable, afraid. As Bentley showed her out of the office with further warnings, she sighed inwardly with relief at not having been dismissed from her job.

STOPPING BY HER tiny office several doors down from Bentley's, Susan sought the solace of her pillbox. She grabbed a handful—Vicodin, Xanax, Demerol—whatever. It didn't really matter any longer. As long as they cleared her constant headaches and relentless white noise in her brain. She looked longingly at the "narc pack" of syringes and ampoules she kept hidden in her lower desk drawer.

A full day lay ahead: Ward rounds, a session in her service, trials duties down in the CRU. With Bentley's hawk-eyes on her she couldn't take any chances. She tried to resist the pack but the lure was too strong. Grabbing one of the pre-filled syringes, she shot up and felt the immediate rush. Warm comforting waves drained the fire, washed away Bentley's wild tirade and cleared her mind.

Ten minutes later, garbed in the new level-one infectious gear—full gown, gloves, mask, face shield and cap, she imagined she might appear as an otherworldly being gliding through the ranks of the infirm in the infectious diseases wards. Sadly, doctors had become aliens to those who most needed the human touch in a modern world terrorized by primordial organisms. But infection control this aggressive had become necessary as breathing. As always, the atmosphere here was grave, since death

hovered constantly over these patients who languished in worsening states of despair. The hushed air belied the acute business that went on at a constant pace as doctors, nurses, orderlies and the courageous candy strippers took care of the sick. All of this was the only world she knew. She was grateful for her reprieve. Bentley's sentence of a month's probation was better than being fired, or losing her medical license.

During rounds it was clear she wasn't only exhausted, but preoccupied as well and barely able to concentrate as the highs wore off and the accompanying low followed. Times like these she doubted her choice of profession. She had a tendency to become too close to her patients, too involved in their suffering. Which was starting to make her new life here a dubious, precarious thing. But returning to Boston was not an option. That avenue lay fraught with its own horrors. Considering her recent past, her problems at Mass General, there were things back there she could never face.

Pausing between patients to gather herself, she spotted a familiar figure and her spirits rose. Despite the gear she recognized the handsome Dr Jason Wells. In the three months since joining the trials team, she'd become enamored of her self-effacing colleague. A loner like her, he'd begun to seek out her company. But since that afternoon, three days ago, when she'd popped into his treatment room and asked about her missing teenage patient, Jason had begun avoiding her. Whatever his problem was, he must be over it, she figured, as she watched him approach her, now.

"Hey, Conner," he greeted with a quick smile. Handing her a small white envelope, he tapped her on the elbow. "Check it out later, in private, okay." He held a conspiratorial finger to the shield above his lips, then turned and resumed his rounds.

Susan smiled. *Thanks for passing on the info about my birthday, Maureen.*

She couldn't wait to get out of protective gear to read the note, but just as she turned for the exit, her pager went off. She was urgently needed in the AIDS ICU.

“DR CONNER, it’s Mr Reynolds. He’s going down fast. Been calling for you.” One of the nurses gestured toward a hospital bed surrounded by a crowd of uniforms.

Dr Gretchen Kühn, the tall, angular, blond resident in the AICU, nodded. “It’s astounding he’s pulled so long. He was hysterical all morning despite his weakened state. Could barely make out his words until Phyllis figured he wanted you.”

Susan turned to Reynolds, leaned in close and touched his upper arm. Tubes ran into his nose, a drip in his arm, EKG leads on his once great barreled chest, which now resembled an Auschwitz survivor’s. He was on renal dialysis. His yellow skin was freckled with Kaposi’s, his eyes barely opened as he labored to breathe.

The late fiftyish bachelor was one of her favorite patients. His thoughtful, informative conversations and impeccable bearing reminded her of her father. Reynolds had full-blown AIDS. Two weeks ago he’d been taken to Mercy Hospital in Brooklyn with breathing problems then transferred back here. The doctors there could not control his fever and his kidneys had started to fail. Mercy was small, overburdened and clearly unable to handle major cases. His primary diagnosis was pneumonia and Reynolds would’ve probably pulled through had his bloods not revealed the presence of a deadly superbug— MRSA or Methicillin-resistant *Staph aureus*. It was a vicious bacterial strain resistant not only to Methicillin— the antibiotic of choice— but to virtually every other antibiotic. It was one of the many lethal microorganisms spawned by the indiscriminate use of antibiotics. Commonly, it was referred to as a hospital infection— something that lurked in the nooks and crannies of a hospital, frequently contracted by patients during hospital stays. To someone with HIV, this was the death sentence. Considering the time frames involved, Susan was convinced he’d got the bug at Mercy. She’d been furious they’d omitted its mention in the transfer reports.

The irony was that Reynolds had won a place in the SW500 lottery. But, cynical of the new anti-AIDS therapies, he'd relinquished that place to his life partner and fellow AIDS victim, Arnie Shafer. Later, watching Arnie's miraculous recovery from the disease, Reynolds would battle not to lament his selfless but fatal decision.

She liked the old Brit who wouldn't miss an opportunity to regale her with stories of his days in the SAS.

"Mr Reynolds?" Susan took his hand. "It's Susan Conner."

He opened his eyes, narrow slits in response. Then a little wider, looking at her with a glazed expression until recognition sparked. Reynolds barely lifted his head, tried to speak, growing frantic as the words would not come. The effort showed up on the EKG, a sudden unsteady rhythm. The monitors began complaining, but no one moved yet. She patted his hand. Leaned in closer until her shield misted with his breath. "Easy, Mr Reynolds. Just take your time."

"Doc," he eventually whispered. "Wanted to tell . . .you . . .About Arnie, what happened. He . . .was doing so well . . . on the drug trials. Then—" Reynolds' head slumped back, his breathing, noisy. He was gripped by a paroxysmal coughing fit.

"Maybe we should talk later, Mr Reynolds. You need rest . . ."

He shook his head. A barely perceptible movement, his face contorting. "No. Arnie's death . . . not an accident . . . someone . . . some—" a hiss escaped his lips as he tried to finish his words. Susan felt his hand go limp in hers as his eyes stayed locked on her with an empty, soulless look now.

11

HYSTERIA SPILLED FROM every pore of Dr Leland's body. But praise the Lord, he was still alive, laughing, crying. They'd let him go.

Only, he could barely see . . . and he was wet from head to toe. The sensation in his pants was just horrible. He couldn't remember the precise moment when it had happened or how it'd happened, but he felt humiliated.

He'd underestimated them. They'd killed the two agents, taken their place and picked him up at the rendezvous, taken him blindfolded to a room.

For hours they'd shone the bright light into his taped-open eyes. He couldn't see for the pain and the white heat of blindness. But he'd felt the muzzle of the gun, heard the click of the hammer in a game of Russian Roulette being played on him. The voice, echoing in that room, repeating the demands: Give us back what's rightfully ours. That or your life. Simple. We know you took the files, we heard you on that payphone to the FBI. Oh yes, don't be surprised, it's as easy to eavesdrop on a payphone as any other. We just had to get a good view of you, that's all. He'd almost broken when they'd pulled the trigger a second time, but he knew he couldn't. They'd kill him if he revealed the location of the files. He'd cried like a baby, insisted he'd never kept anything, that he'd been so scared for his life, his family, he'd lied to the FBI just to get help. Whatever he had, it was all in his head. That was the safest route to go.

And, incredibly, they'd believed him, set him free . . .

Or had they really? Harvey wondered as he felt the pain in his gut return. Even though the lights in his mirror were gone, the hulking Blazer no longer trailing him, he had a feeling their evil game was not over yet.

12

SUSAN HAD NO time to dwell on Reynolds' cryptic last words. She had to rush through early rounds and her patient service to make CRU duty on time.

Leaving the AIDS ICU she approached an adjoining ward marked

INFECTIOUS ZONE

AUTHORISED PERSONNEL ONLY

Large bright biohazard flowers posted on doors further warned of the perils lurking beyond. Here the atmosphere was in stark contrast to the rest of Infectious Diseases. Somber was not the word, but eerie or frightening—even for those who routinely worked here. These were nicknamed the Black Wards after the Black Plague. Like everyone that arrived here, Susan's heart upped its pace, her body preparing itself for the horror that lay in store.

Such was the mental and physical hazard in this zone that no one worked here more than three times a week for longer than two hours per day.

She swiped her security card into the wall slot and a door opened into a locker area. More signs urged the removal of personal items including jewelry and a change into surgical scrubs. Moving onward, through a maze of doors, she came to an area marked Biosafety Level 4. Here she passed through decontaminating showers before changing into a moon suit with a clear plastic face. Pressing a switch at her hip, she turned on the breathing backpack with HEPA filter, which piped fresh air into her suit. At the next door she punched in a personal numeric code into the keypad then entered.

During her first passage through here she'd been puzzled by the seemingly overdone biosafety measures. This was AIDS. Deadly, but not Ebola, or Avian Flu. Why

all the heavy armor? But quickly she had come to realize the necessity of it.

Passing a nurses' station she greeted the woman seated behind a bank of monitors. In the ward were perhaps forty patients lying mostly motionless in their beds.

Three physicians were already busy as she walked up to the charge nurse and began her rounds of the ten patients in her allocation. Susan suppressed a wave of pity as she reached the bed of a nine-year-old girl. Her skeletal features were so gaunt and haunting it appeared as though her skeleton had been vacuum-packed in her skin. The child's eyes bulged large and frighteningly alien, her mouth in a rigid grimace. Only her second week in the hospital, this child with a rare strain of HIV was already in an advanced stage of full-blown AIDS. Most of these patients had a mutated variant of 3DCR-HIV the most virulent form of AIDS. Nearly all of these patients had myriad opportunistic infections. Their bodies were pocked, bloody, lips swollen and blistered with Herpes lesions, their mouths and throats full of ulcers. Persistent coughing kept an infected aerosol of pus, mucus and blood in the hazardous environment.

If this was bad, Susan thought, mentally preparing herself for more of the same, the rest of her patients were all children. For this morning was her pediatric consult. And, if the general AIDS wards in this era of failing antiretroviral therapies, was an exercise in increasing futility, than this was a horror of abject hopelessness.

Steeling herself, she went through all her cases without losing it emotionally, thanks to the meds in her system which kept her on a reasonably even keel.

After passing through decon showers she discarded the moon suit and checked her watch. Not bad. Only forty-five minutes late. Riding the elevator to the first floor, she rushed through the long corridor of procedures rooms passing by the ER and took the connecting glass and steel walkway to the entrance of the CRU. Swiping her card in a slot beside the glass double doors, she felt the thrill of trepidation. While the place

continued to astonish, to trigger the rush of adrenaline each morning, its initial “Wonderland” was fast transmogrifying into the color and shape of suspicion for her.

The airlock doors slid open and negative pressure sucked the air around her. Entering the bright glare of the high-vaulted vestibule’s fluorescent lighting, she surrendered personal items to security before passing through metal detectors.

Trials were conducted weekdays from late morning to late afternoon. A specific series of events preceded access of patient data in the warren of paperless rooms: First, the biometric test— FIDS – Fingerprint ID, followed by a retinal scan; then a bar code was scanned off the patient’s bracelet worn for the duration of the session. This opened the SW500 Protocol Menu. New data during each session was captured through voice commands, or via a sealed asepsis keyboard to the relevant file under the main menu.

Ever since her initial days here the place appeared beyond high tech. Each exam room equipped with central PC stations, LCD monitors and automated beds surrounded by stainless steel and matte aluminum fittings. Recessed overhead lighting simulated daylight in the windowless rooms brimming with installations that made her research labs at Harvard appear positively obsolete. Nanotech enhanced intelligent fabric and materials were antibacterial in nature. The corridors had curves instead of traditional corners which “eliminated the danger of accidental collisions at blind right-angled turns,” Bentley had proudly explained during her orientation.

It was a breathtaking introduction for her— the prospect of working on leading research in an environment that reeked of lucrative backing. But she’d been nervous, too. In these icy rooms of steel and state-of-the-art electronics, everything whispered perfection, the gleaming cutting-edge equipment intimidating as blades.

This morning, for most of her session, Susan toiled in a continued state of funk. Meeting, greeting and treating her patients without pause, she only surfaced way past

lunch time, thankful for the brief lull in her schedule.

Reynolds' words remained at the back of her mind, but she barely had a moment to reflect on them. Susan had only discovered that Arnie was an SW500 trials patient post mortem. Reynolds had come in recently looking particularly depressed. His life partner had died, he'd said. "Arnie. Ah yes, just Arnie. 'Fraid that's all I'm allowed to divulge, Dr Conner. Hush-hush, top-secret drug trials and all that, you know." He went on about how Arnie had survived man's greatest nemesis—AIDS— and then allowed himself to be killed by something as unremarkable as a New York bus. Susan had paid little attention then, but recalled now how the man had babbled on about Arnie being paranoid, complaining of being stalked by a strange man. About how someone had tried to push him off a curb, but he'd been saved as the bus swerved and missed him. And the very next day Arnie had been run over by a bus and killed.

She was still pondering the meaning of Reynolds' words when the intercom squawked, announcing her next patient. Susan's attention immediately went to the wall clock, her thoughts turning to Tyrone since this was the after school time.

Maybe today he'll show up eventually and everything will return to normal—just as it seemed to be with Jason this morning—

She fingered Jason's note in her pocket, nervous to look at it just yet. What would it be? she wondered. A greeting card, an invite to a date, perhaps?

In the weeks since joining the team she'd become attracted to her mild-mannered colleague, albeit with considerable guilt, since she felt she still had to grieve for Robert. Recently they'd begun sharing tables in the hospital mess. He'd even taken to sitting next to her during the M and M and CRU meetings. She liked that he was shy. Their platonic dance around each other was so much like a schoolyard crush, which appeared to be Jason's benign style, and pleasingly safe for her.

A cough broke Susan's reverie. A waif-like girl of about fourteen had entered the room. She was dressed in frayed, faded denim jeans and an old baby pink and blue plaid top. Her auburn fringe blazed from under a floppy denim hat, above her freckled forehead. (Cissy Spacek in Winona Ryder's body, Susan always thought.) It was Laura, the only other teenager in her trials group. The only other patient she'd become close to. The young victims of AIDS were always the ones that gripped her heart.

"Hey, Dr Conner," the girl breathlessly greeted.

"Hey, young lady." Susan smiled, careful not to greet her young friend by name.

"Sounds like you ran all the way up here?"

The girl rolled her eyes, "Yeah. Wouldn't that be something." Her voice was small, fine, the strains of an augmented chord coming through a harp.

"None of that negativity now," Susan gently chided. "Keep your appointments, take all meds, and soon you'll be able to do just about anything you set your mind to."

"Yeah. I guess."

"Anyway, how are you doing? Eating regular meals and taking those supps?"

"Like a junkie. All 16 of the yucky pills, if I don't puke first." She gave a little giggle. "You should see my roomie—which reminds me, I'll be needing a whole lot more than the last time. Coretta's convinced I'm a junkie or something. Man. She's always pinching the stuff, but can't figure why they won't do anything for her."

Susan laughed. "I see. Well, it certainly won't do her any harm."

"I guess." Laura pirouetted toward a counter. She dropped books, unshouldered the bright print floral backpack that Susan had noticed was all the rage on the street—like a spring parade in the fall—then, stepped up to the examination bed.

Adjusting her glasses, Susan trailed the girl's small movements—a sparrow on a ledge. "You might want to get through with this, first?" She gestured at the Lucite

plaque displaying the ID icons.

“Oh, yeah, sure. Soon’s I catch up here.” Laura pursed her dry, pale lips. “Phew!” She sounded out of breath. “Man. It’s like my batteries are draining too fast. Wish you’d give me something, Doc.”

Susan frowned. “That’s what the supplements are for. But . . . maybe you’re coming down with something . . .”

“Yeah or maybe they’re old. I read somewhere how hospitals are cutting costs, using stuff beyond their expiry dates. . . Or . . . maybe we should try something else.”

Susan looked thoughtful. “Tell you what, we’ll check your latest test results first. Then take it from there, all right?”

Laura assented with a little shrug. The girl had been this way for weeks. Tired and listless, but today she looked downright pale. Though her previous onscreen stats were within accepted norms for her condition, Susan became uneasy. After the ID check she accessed the results, then leaned back pensively for a moment. All the profiles were perfect, as expected, so she couldn’t figure what was going on.

On a thought she ran a thorough search through Laura’s records. She stopped at an entry—a group of symptoms she’d captured into Laura’s file a few weeks ago. They were similar to those she’d seen in Tyrone’s file and in others in her group. She had no way of accessing more records to verify comparisons, yet her disquiet grew.

Rising, she approached Laura on the exam bed, her eyes grown dark, brow furrowed. Inexplicably, Reynolds’ words came to mind and she thought to say something, to warn Laura—of she knew not what— but stopped, as the whirring of the overhead camera’s auto focus came to her ears.

A quizzical look appeared on the girl’s face. “Doc? Bad news . . . ?”

Susan blinked. “No. No, actually, everything looks just . . . fine. The usual. I’m

just going to up the dosages of your meds.”

Through the rest of the afternoon, Susan scoured the online charts as patients arrived, making comparisons with Laura’s file. Finally, logging off the system with her personalized user code, she sat back in the peace of the treatment room.

SW500 was in no small way a true revolution. She’d heard the moving testimonials. Patients who’d once been condemned to death, now walked in unaided and left to live the lives they never expected to have. She gave silent thanks for that.

Quietly, thanks to advances like SW500, the world was changing, a new epoch dawning. One day soon the world would awake into a post AIDS era.

Presently she heard activity in the corridor— colleagues leaving to round up duties elsewhere before home. She reached for Jason’s note, the barest hint of a smile on her lips. Mindful of the SpyCam, she turned away before opening the envelope.

Hey, Conner, he began, in a surprisingly neat hand, on a prescription sheet,

I’d really like to see you, tonight.

8-ish, Harry’s New York Bar on Madison Ave?

Come Alone. Don’t mention this to anyone, please!

And get rid of the note once you’re through.

J.W.

13

HARVEY LELAND SHOOK the negative thoughts from his mind.

The fact was, they'd let him go and he could not believe his luck. After all he'd done, Sloane-Wright's heavies had let him go. It hurt so much from all the places he'd pinched himself that he figured this could never be a dream.

Now he had to focus on the positive.

He was gunning it on the highway about to make the exit for home. Lucky to be alive, he was thinking only of his family, of his girls, of Bernice who would always forgive him. How good it would feel to have them in his arms, have his life back after the ordeal at the hospital, the constant fear, the watching over his shoulder.

"Praise the Lord," he yelled, euphoric, but suddenly wondered why he was breaking out so heavily in sweat.

He was flying down the exit ramp, going as fast and as confidently as the Porsche could take him, eager to see his family again.

But the ache in the pit of his belly suddenly deepened. His heart pummeled the inside of his chest. He was looking at a large rig beyond the lights at the end of the exit.

The mechanical horse-and-trailer crawling on the route perpendicular to his exit and directly in the Porsche's path, loomed large in his vision as he realized he'd been pumping on his brakes for perhaps thirty seconds now.

But there was nothing there.

14

THE COLD DAY had turned into an even colder, wet evening, so Susan called a cab.

Nervous to the point of trembling for her first date in two years, she'd tried on nearly everything in her cupboard. Eventually she settled for jeans, black low-heeled ankle boots, a navy sweater and camel-colored hooded jacket. She patted make-up to hide the rings around her eyes and observed with regret the gauntness that was starting to show in her face. Her slim figure was accentuated by the snug fit jeans, which she hoped would cast some allure Jason's way. Thinking of him, she hugged herself as a thrill radiated from her tummy down to her pelvis causing her to squirm in her seat. She felt strange and fearful as an *ingénue en route to a lover's tryst, out in the cold night*.

Outside her window rain hushed into fine mist over the city. Streetlights dangled like frosted festive ornaments above the bleeding wake of traffic. Her thoughts battled to find rhythm or cadence despite the steady metronome of the cab's windshield wipers. How things had changed for her. Other times she'd relish the insular beauty of a night like this: Cocooned in a vehicle navigating the neon sea of the city, fog nuzzling her window, muting the world and making magic of her solitude. This night, however, moving through the wet glistening world, bubbles of concern burst in her belly. A paradox of feelings plagued her: how she thrilled at the prospect of seeing a potential friend and lover, and how her guilt swelled like a tumor, the eyes of her dead husband glaring like malignancy.

On Madison, she squared her shoulders, breathing deeply as she entered the bar. Spotting Jason, seated at a table way across the bar, she hesitated. Her heart sank. She thought to turn and leave. But he saw her too and stood up to wave an unsteady hand.

The tail of his shirt was untucked beneath the jacket of his rumpled, frigate-gray suit.

With gathering consternation she took in his tousled hair, sandy-blond strands dark with sweat, or rain most probably. Continuing toward his table, toward his terribly disheveled form, she sensed this was no date, that he knew nothing of her birthday and the note was no romantic mystery. Jason appeared drunk or close to getting there. His eyes were red, droopy. Her embarrassment and hurt turned palpable— only she didn't think he was in any condition to notice or even care.

"Hey Conner, didn't really think you'd show."

Was he slurring?

"Something tells me I shouldn't have, Jason. What the hell's going on?"

Patrons from neighboring tables looked their way. Jason's eyebrows collapsed at the corners. He splayed both palms on the table, leaned closer. "Whoa, easy, Conner. Easy, okay? At least, take a seat." He gestured to the empty chair, before casually signaling the waitress. "What'll you have?"

"The reason you gave me this note. The reason I'm here." As she sat, she took the note from her purse, flung it on the table. "And you can get rid of it yourself."

Jason blanched. Then snatched the paper and shoved it into his breast pocket. "The hell you do that for, Conner? You're the one who came to me, remember?"

She gave him a baffled look.

"Last week . . . Looking all desperate, wanting to know about this teenager—patient of yours in the Unit. Tall, black, Nike stud in his ear, etc., etc."

Susan swallowed. "This is about Tyrone?"

The waitress approached their table and Jason indicated his glass.

"If that's his name, yeah."

The bar felt too warm now. Propping her jacket on a chair, she was tempted to

order a Scotch but cautiously settled for a soda. She could never hold her drinks well. Just two and she was a goner. But Jason's intended subject matter caused the crows in her belly to start pecking. Reaching into her handbag, she grabbed some pills and popped them in her mouth.

She ignored Jason's frown and studied his eyes, noting they revealed little— a home after dark with the lights out. Of course, this could be a set up by Bentley to find out what she was up to. If not, why had Jason not spoken up earlier? He was a part of the original trials team and often hung in the company of Dr Dwight Poole, Bentley's second-in-command in the CRU.

"You didn't seem to know anything at the time."

"Couldn't talk in that room. You're a newbie. You don't know the CRU. . ." He paused. "Anyway, truth is, I've also been trying to find a trials patient of mine and coming up with dead ends."

Well, so much for the delusions. It felt like being exonerated of a crime.

"She was in my group. A model . . .well, former Vogue model. She hailed from upstate New York. And that's all she'd say about herself. Couldn't even get her first name. Protocol. They know they'll be kicked off the program if they break the rules. I'd just call her Cindy on account of this mole she had right here." He indicated his upper lip. "Her recovery had been no less miraculous than the other patients in the program. You've only been here three, four months, but I think you know what I mean."

Yeah, she thought. Feeling a connection with her colleague now, her earlier anger and disappointment submitted to curiosity.

He went on, speaking slowly, carefully, as if trying hard to keep control. Obviously he'd been drinking long before her arrival. He took a little gulp of his whisky then looked at her. Some of the lights came on in his eyes.

“Extreme makeovers of the Biblical kind. Death to life. She turned from this emaciated waif into . . .” His eyes widened. “It’s crazy, but I developed a mad crush on her, had dreams of asking her out someday—”

Susan made a face and Jason waved away the expression. “Yeah, I know. She had AIDS. But with SW500, that was no longer a concern. It was a matter of time before all our patients were virus-free and on maintenance therapy.”

“She was your *patient*, Jason.”

“Yeah. *Before* she vanished.” He inhaled deeply, blew out slowly. He was inclined to fidget with his ear lobe. As though he sought the phantom presence of a stud he’d worn there during some youthful foray.

Jason looked away for a moment, noticing something behind her. “Yeah. Well, after her third consecutive missed appointment, I tried to find out what had happened. I mean I couldn’t—” He waited until the returning waitress set down their drinks and left. Then spoke so much softer that she had to lean in to hear him over the din. “I couldn’t imagine her giving up a second chance at life. Unless she’d naively figured she’d already beat the disease. Or, God forbid, she’d fallen back in the habit— Coke, heroin—she was a regular Kate Moss before our obligatory drug rehab program her first six months of the trials. I imagined the worst. I mean what if she was lying totally smacked in some hole, somewhere? I couldn’t understand why there wasn’t some kind of control from higher up— Admin or something— you know, tracking compliance. I mean this is only gonna be the event of the century, when it’s done.”

He paused as though waiting for some kind of affirmation of that point from her.

“You’re going to have to speak up.” She indicated a rowdy group at the bar.

“Yeah. So I pestered one of the Admin people. Riley, at the front desk—” He made a scary face, his hands up in claws. “But the witch contacted Poole, who went to

the Chief. They pulled me in, gave me the low down on protocol. You know, like keep it professional, objective.” Jason shook his head, emitted a mirthless laugh. “But the more appointments she missed the more obsessed I became with this quest to find out where she was, *who* she was. Then Bentley threatened to take me off the program.”

Susan started to identify now, felt the urge to confide, but held back. Jason’s problem felt too much a parallel of her own, to be genuine. “What did you do?”

“Well, as you can imagine, before these guys started getting heavy, trying to get me to back off. I was just worried about her. Now I became suspicious, and their actions just goaded me. It’s like, why do they care? What are they trying to hide? I couldn’t figure their paranoia. But they needn’t have bothered stopping me. Because suddenly I realized . . .” He shook his head. “There was nowhere to search. It’s crazy.”

“What about inpatient records?” she ventured, abandoning her initial caution. “Weren’t the worst cases inpatients initially? And what about records in Rehab?”

“Been there. Path and Radiology too. Central Admin should have records of all our patients in the CRU. But what do you begin with? To initiate a search, you need at least one piece of key personal info. What I did try, however, was a query for a patient with an upstate address. I knew she lived in central Manhattan for years now, but I thought the insurance details might’ve included her original address. Zilch.”

“Didn’t you check with the other doctors, the nursing staff?”

“The way you did?”

He watched her shrug, presently quit at the reddened earlobe, relaxed by his progressive insobriety and her interest now. Something caught his attention to her left again. When he resumed he appeared nervous. “A patient drops out of a major life-saving treatment program. Isn’t it natural for a doctor to be concerned? Anyway, Bentley and Poole were obviously following my tracks. I’d get these cold looks from

them in the Unit, in the wards, the clinics, like I was stealing stuff. I'd sweat under the SpyCam in the treatment room. I'd look up in the changeroom and see eyes on me . . ."

He looked at her as if expecting a reaction. She said nothing.

"Word gets around in this place. It got crazy after this. Weird phone calls . . . whispered threats in the dead of night. I thought they were just going way over the top. All the horror stuff was like a bad movie." Jason frowned. "I figured, if they'd just made up some story about the patient, I'd've quit looking. Period. I said as much to Poole . . . That I didn't think it was funny. A few heavy breathers couldn't stop me from checking up on my own patient. His reaction totally freaked me. Poole looked genuinely bewildered, then laughed. Said I must be on drugs, that I should get help because he hadn't the faintest clue what I was ranting on about. No patient had quit the program."

Susan folded her arms and sat forward. She hadn't touched her drink yet.

"I continued digging, making phone calls to modeling agencies. Eventually, on the Vogue website, I found her face on an old cover. God, she must've been nineteen or so. That got me her name, and so on. I had no idea, of course, that they were eavesdropping on my apartment, my computer, my phones. Things got worse. My place at the Mews had been 'broken into' a few times, nothing damaged just things misplaced. One morning I got up to find the front door ajar. Next to my bed, was a picture of me, doctored to show my body naked, dismembered. Just the thought someone was in there while I lay sleeping. Jesus! The movie clichés were becoming my horrible reality. I couldn't stop trembling that whole day, started looking over my shoulder, scared shit, vulnerable. It's when I decided to quit."

Jason tossed his drink in a single gulp, wiped lips on his sleeve and hissed from the fire at his throat. Then stared at her. "That's where you came in. That afternoon when you stepped into my treatment room, started asking these questions— it was like a

gift. I mean, when something like this happens, you feel alone, helpless. You know how it is— every moment you're in the Unit, in that spectacular place, it's like a dream." He suppressed a hiccup. "You're walking on this alien planet where things are different from earthly reality. Then that dream suddenly turns to a nightmare . . . Then you find out there's someone else going through the same thing, someone who'd understand."

"That was two weeks ago, Jason. Why didn't you say something sooner? You live in the same building. We could've spoken. Why the cloak and dagger?"

"Jesus! (Jeshush) Have you even been listening? I know I'm drunk and I'm sorry. I'm sorry for calling you out and being this way. But when you're shit scared, one drink takes the edge off. Then you need another to help kill the shaking and then another because it's the only thing that's gonna give you the courage." He shut his eyes tightly, as if he were dizzy, then opened them again and shook his head. "They're everywhere, watching, listening. It took all this just to speak with you. And yeah, it sounds weird, but I was a nervous wreck after handing you that note. Because then, it wouldn't only be me. They'd come after you, too. And I couldn't risk t—"

He was distracted again and he abruptly stopped. He'd been poking glances to her left where something had been gnawing at his attention. Now he was transfixed.

When he looked at her, he hiccupped, swallowed hard, his jaw muscles contracting. His eyes darted back and forth. He appeared stricken, sobered up.

Questioning him with her eyes, she followed his fearful gaze to the left and back of her. Finding nothing out of the ordinary, she frowned. "What . . . ?"

"Aw, Jesus Christ," he muttered "I have to go, Conner."

"What . . . ?" she repeated, incredulous. "What's happening, Jason?"

He put money on the table. "Look, you should leave too, but not now, not with me. And be careful." He started to rise. "I should never have involved you."

"No. Wait." She caught the cuff of his jacket. "At least tell me what's going on." Her voice rose. "You can't just call me out then leave without an explanation."

He pulled away with a remorseful gaze. "Just wanted to help, to warn you. I just couldn't keep quiet after you came to me, looking so concerned for that kid. I. . ." He shrugged, turned on his heels and staggered out into the wet night.

Susan was bewildered. This felt like twilight zone stuff. She turned around to check what could have spooked Jason so and noticed a man seated alone a few tables away. He'd obviously come in just before Jason had left. The shoulders of his dark trench coat glistened with rain, the collar pulled up to his ears. He was mid forties, heavysset, sporting a thick walrus mustache and the over-the-ears-and-collar hairstyle of someone from a 1980's movie. Though he held open a newspaper, he was gazing askance at her and appeared to be talking to himself until she spotted the discreet black earpiece in his ear and the thin cord disappearing down into his collar.

She turned away understanding why Jason had fled. Were they watching her too she wondered? Thinking of her run in with Bentley that morning, his threats, her breathing quickened, the restless birds in her belly awakened. She wanted to leave but felt too weak to stand. Her hands began to shake. She felt the thirst, the craving, reach her throat. From her purse, she dug out a handful of pills and swallowed, gulping down the Coke she hadn't touched until now.

Signaling the waitress, she ordered a beer. Then another.

Dear God. What basis was there for this irrational fear? The bar was busy, people seeking its cozy sanctuary in a miserable night. Yet the skin along her neck and arms stiffened. Her colleague's terror had become a contagion.

15

MELLOWED BY THE beer and meds, Susan began to relax, enjoying the hum of bar chatter, the din of clinking glasses and laughter. Until she noticed the stranger had gone. He'd left behind his unfinished drink, his still opened newspaper. She grew tense, fearful for Jason. Imagined him staggering down some dark wet alley, tailed by a killer.

Then she shook her head, sank back into her chair, as the irrationality of it struck her. Somehow, surrounded by this reassuring crowd, Jason's terror just didn't seem real. Her doubts were further cemented when she noticed the ubiquitous cell phone headsets and iPod earbuds dangling from so many ears.

If Jason was out there running from someone, she felt certain it was a ghost.

Still, her curiosity piqued, she considered following him home to hear the rest of his account. He also lived at Riverview Mews, like most of the hospital's out-of-town personnel. But her instincts resisted. He was so wound up, he'd probably freak if she appeared at his door. More than that, her pride had taken a knock this evening when she'd discovered Jason's real purpose here, that he had feelings for another woman.

Ordering more beer, she thought to linger. It was her birthday after all. Perhaps some hunk would attempt to fill the empty seat before her and make her night. As time passed, however, she remained alone, her misery deepened and she rose to leave.

It wasn't as if she was looking for a one night stand, or that she scoured crowds for lovers. All she wanted was someone to talk to, to soften the edges, color the blank spaces. A simple wish which might remain forever unanswered. Her love and social life were a mess. And it wasn't hard to imagine why. In the wake of the tragedy and her subsequent therapy, there'd been a nebulous, hysterical period, when she'd begun

assuming a disguise, in stages. First, she cut her long blond hair and took to wearing a severe style—hair drawn back into a bun—which, on its own, radically changed her look. Then came the schoolmarm glasses, followed by drab off-the-rack clothing.

Her therapist back home had a term for this behavior, no doubt. It would infer something twisted, psychopathological. But all she cared about was being unrecognizable to Robert's murderer the day he returned to finish the job. The fact that she still maintained the disguise after all this time and so far from Boston was something she hadn't cared to deal with, until now. It had become ingrained in her psyche, an alter-ego that suppressed her own rhythm, her passions. Soon, though, it would have to go if her life were ever to regain a sense of normalcy.

But what would it take to cast off the baggage, to reveal the woman within, and the body that Robert used to call 'the bonfire of sensuality consuming his brain 24/7'?

Back home as rain drummed against her windows, she winced as unbidden flashes of Robert's and Nate's brutal murders strobed through her brain. Despite the months in therapy, resolution still evaded her, and that terrible night, red-tinged and rank with the visceral stench of death, would not leave her in peace.

Sodden with tears and rain, she undressed, leaving her clothes where they'd fallen. Naked, trembling, she took a bottle of wine and headed for her bedroom. Setting out her array of pills and drug paraphernalia on the nightstand, she crept into bed and reached for them: Vicodins for the pain, Xanax for insomnia, wine for the rough edges. These would take her away from the lightless abyss of her tormented psyche.

Then, deep into night when the hardiest of her adopted fellow Islanders slept and she, like the Atlantic in the Bay, tossed in her bed, she could depend on her vials of narcotics. Plunged in her soft veins, they'd bring the rapture and rest she desired. She wasn't fazed by her need for ever higher doses as her body began tolerating an

increasing amount of her current drugs.

More wine and she squirmed in her bed. *Oh Robert.* She moaned. Nights like these she craved him, lusted for his hands on her, his hard body against her own and his face . . . She whimpered, letting out a wail as again his face wouldn't come to her. Time was starting to erase the details but not the pain. Panicking, she embraced herself, pushed her mind to feel the way it had felt the last time they'd made love . . .

Two days before his murder, he surprises her again. Friday evening, another brutal day at the hospital behind her. Nate's already asleep thanks to Robert's story time routine. She'd already called her baby from the hospital and bid him goodnight.

Much later, when she finally comes home, the house is redolent with the aroma of rich food. Robert pokes his head beyond the kitchen door, giving her a mischievous wink. "See you upstairs in a while, Hon, you must be famished."

Scented candles line the dresser, the nightstand. Through the open bathroom door, steam wafts out with chamomile and lavender on the air. Undressing, she immerses herself in the herbal bath Robert has run for her. On a low stool there's a bottle of wine in a bucket of ice. Soaking in that groggy, prurient heat, sipping wine and shedding the day's stresses like old skin, she stirs, yearning for him.

Emerging later, eager, suffused, swollen with thoughts of him, she slips into secretly bought lingerie laid out for her— a little number so flimsy, so revealing, it makes her blush. Entering the room, Robert slips a piece of lobster, still dripping with sauce, into her mouth, before taking her in his arms . . .

16***Wednesday 20 November***

NEXT MORNING SUSAN resolved to see Jason first thing. Despite her rationalizing, his conduct had left her mildly spooked, raising the stake of a danger that had, until then, only toyed with her consciousness. She was more determined than ever now, to find Tyrone, and desperate to alert Laura when the girl came in the following day.

After rounds she caught up with him en route to the CRU. She pulled him into one of the procedures' room just beyond the ER.

"You owe me an explanation, Jason."

"Yeah . . . Hey . . . Conner. How you doing?"

She glared.

"What can I say? I'm sorry. I was drunk, talking crazy, a load of bull."

"C'mon, Jason. What about the Vogue model. What about Bentley, Poole—"

His expression suddenly changed. He gripped her elbow, his eyes darting to the door. "Stop it. None of that here, okay. We can't take this anywhere, if only you knew."

She jerked her elbow free. "If only I knew what?"

"That getting deeper isn't safe. I learnt the hard way. You don't have to."

"Gimme a break, Jason. The man in the bar was nobody. You're just paranoid."

"Yeah, that's it. I'm just all messed up in here." He pointed at his head as he started for the door.

She caught his sleeve. "Don't blow me off, okay."

Jason sighed. "Look. I'm just as much in the dark as you. I swear. If you're really looking for answers, if you're that desperate- that. . . suicidal, I guess there's

someone. When I was trying to find out stuff, I'd heard about this ER nurse, Griffiths, who helps out when the Unit reception is backed up. She knows her way with patients. Is into social work, volunteers at the counseling center, local soup kitchen, youth AIDS programs and stuff. Kinda Oprah's angel. You might—”

Jason's expression did an about turn again, becoming the same as in the bar. Turning, she saw Dr Dwight Poole step into the room.

He stared in mock surprise, his gaze floating from one to the other. She thought she saw him nod at her colleague, raise his eyebrows a fraction; the barest hint of censure, causing Jason to gasp.

Then Poole's deathly pale mug loosened in a smile.

Susan's visible disgust was immediate. She'd always struggled to hide her inexplicable loathing of Poole— his pink-lipped sneer, his leering gaze and that eerie grey-eyed deathly pale Klaus Kinski face.

“Oh, pardon me,” he said in his cynical drawl. “Didn't know the room was occupied. Conner. Wells.” He nodded and left the room.

Jason was devastated. She noticed for the first time just how drawn he looked— his eyes bloodshot, tired. Last night, despite his bedraggled state, he hadn't looked half as bad. Her anger was supplanted by concern.

“O God, Jason, something's happened since we spoke last night . . .”

“They just hit me a lot harder . . . That stuff I'd been researching online, trying to find out about 'Cindy'?”

Susan nodded, wincing at the way he went at his earlobe again.

“There were fashion spreads, articles, related blogs—stuff I'd downloaded and printed. Well last night when I returned to my apartment, the hard copies were gone.”

“You could just print more if you downloaded the files? Couldn't you?”

“Yeah, if they hadn’t booby-trapped my PC, I could.” He was visibly annoyed by her incomprehension. “When I booted up, everything functioned normally, until I called up the required file. Then all hell broke loose— applications, root directories, the hard drive, everything began systematically wiping out. They installed some kind of virus triggered by opening the relevant file. I tried a system disc after that. Did a complete system recovery and got the computer running. That’s when I got this smell, saw the tiny plume of smoke coming out the back, and everything crashed again.”

Susan frowned.

“They disabled the processor’s cooling fan right after they overclocked my chip. So it overheated, self-destructed. Jesus. My notebook suffered the same fate and so did my PDA. Just trashing the computers would’ve been the easy solution, but I guess they wanted to prolong my pain, really punish me for speaking with you last night.”

“You could call the police.”

He snorted. Indicated his cell phone. “I went online this morning. Guess what?”

“The sites were all cleaned of references to her.”

“Even Vogue. A company with that kind of pull and you want me to go to the cops? I guess they made their message clear.”

He stared at her for a moment. Then his face crumbled.

She reached out and took his hand. “What else, Jason? Tell me . . .”

He composed himself but wouldn’t look at her. “I didn’t really need all that info, anyway. I’d already found her former agency, already gotten a name. Helen Skarsgaard. Which explained the Nordic features that I went gaga over.” He smiled wistfully. “I’d gotten a number, too. Local, Manhattan, but there was never any answer. Finally, I gave up trying. Add to that all the harassment from Bentley and co., and I just gave up hope, too. Last night, however, after what they’d done, I was furious, drunk, emotional.

"I went online with the phone, ran a check on anywho.com and found a number for the Skarsgaards of Buffalo. It was about the only personal thing I learned from her—that her parents lived there, that she'd grown up hating the dismal grey and cold of West New York. Always dreamed of leaving." Sighing, Jason hunched over a worktop, his palms splayed as though he was tired. "Guess her dream came true."

"What did you find?"

He angled his head toward her.

"It was late, of course, but being a concerned doctor has its advantages. An emotional Mrs. Skarsgaard informed me her daughter had been killed in an automobile accident in Manhattan nearly a month ago. She was surprised I hadn't known. The hospital had been in contact days after it had happened, offered condolences.

"An accident. Now if it were really that simple, then why the high drama? Why didn't these bastards just update their records and inform me?" Straightening, he wiped his face with his palms, checked his watch then abruptly turned for the door. "Got rounds." He half turned to her, eyes averted. "Maybe later . . . Susan."

She cleared her throat. "Me too. And yeah, maybe later." She squeezed his arm.

THE AFTERNOON TRUDGED on with routine and death. Several patients, nearly all of them already comatose for days, finally slipped through the last tethers linking them to life, and were removed in body bags. Many more would not make it through the night. Here, in the black maze, the odor of death was everywhere. It rose from the lines of moaning patients, filtered through masks and minds. It clung like raw fear to those who were yet to die. The dreaded retrovirus had rendered life small and hopeless for its victims who lay in beds they'd never leave alive.

Something was happening all over the east coast. The epidemic was

reawakening, gathering sinister force. Preliminary tests coming in were suggesting a far deadlier strain of the virus, resistant to any medication currently available against it.

Perhaps it was fate that SW500 had come along at this time, she thought and shivered as she recalled something about the trials.

A little after 4:30 P.M., she cut short her session in the wards. After discarding all of her gear but scrubs, she rushed down to the first floor to find the nurses' station a hectic place at shift change. Scanning name tags, she asked around until someone jerked a thumb at a nurse on her way out.

Susan caught up with the woman halfway to the exit.

Griffiths was a mid-twenties, tall, athletic-looking African-American woman with olive skin and short-cropped, straight, brown hair. Susan studied the nurse in profile as she tried to keep up with her long-legged strides.

"Nurse Griffiths?"

The nurse flashed her a sidelong glance, without slowing.

"'Fraid you got the wrong person. Past quittin time I'm just plain Eileen Griffiths going home to my baby. Who's asking?"

Susan tapped her ID tag. "Dr Conner. I thought you'd know me by now."

There was the slightest interruption in the rhythm of the nurse's stride, her body shifting balance to compensate. It was over in a nanosecond, but not lost on Susan. Griffiths turned, looking more closely this time, her pace slowing with recognition.

"Oh, but I do, Doctor. You're one a *them* in there."

"Excuse me?"

The nurse laughed without humor. Glancing at her watch, she turned away, her strides taking up their earlier speed. "The Hotshots, Doc, the great SW500 Team that's gonna change the world. Only, it ain't gonna be this afternoon, so maybe we could let

hospital business wait till morning. I gotta make some stops before I get home.”

Susan’s pulse quickened. The hostile vibe coming off the nurse’s body language intrigued her. They were almost at the exit now and Susan decided to rush it. She was uncomfortable at the prospect of having to follow Griffiths out onto the street, but eager to quickly reap something here. Her hand shot out in reflex, gripping Griffiths’ arm.

“Well, then, I’ll get right to it . . . A patient of mine— a participant in the trials— has quit without an explanation. Just stopped coming in. I was hoping you might know something that could help. All I have is a first name: Tyrone— ”

Griffiths stopped and turned sharply. Her nostrils flared as she glared at her arm. Susan went on quickly, “— he’s this teenager. Tall, almost six-three— ”

“Black. Dead ringer for a younger Magic Johnson, Nike stud in his ear?” The nurse cut in. “Yeah, I know him, Dr Conner. Just like I know a hundred others like him. They pass by these doors every day or come in to our AIDS Counseling Program for the youth. I know him all right, and I know the others, how they feel, what they going through.” The nurse jerked back and Susan pulled her hand away, mumbling an apology. “But why don’t you tell me what you really wanna know, Doctor?” Griffiths’ bag slipped off her shoulder. She caught the strap, held on tightly, her knuckles blue, almost. “Like whether I know what *really* happened to that kid, ain’t that it?”

Susan felt a stab of pain in her gut. She instinctively raised a hand, fearful of the nurse’s volatility. Griffiths waved it aside, jabbed a finger at her. The nurse seethed but controlled her voice, conscious of patients and staff milling about them.

“You the new player on the team. They using you to feel me out. Well, tell whoever sent you that Nurse Griffiths don’t know squat. Tell them to leave me alone.”

Griffiths turned on her heels, but Susan gripped her arm again. “Wait, I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about. It was Dr Wells, who suggested I speak with

you. Tyrone's not just a patient to me. He's . . . my friend, and I just— ”

“Please don't touch me, Dr Conner.” The nurse glared. “And I don't have to answer your questions. You guys in there think you God. You give life and then you take it away just like that.” She snapped her fingers like a firecracker. “Well, God don't need no answers, so don't come by asking me.”

“Please. Just listen to me for one moment. I'm worried about Tyrone . . . others, too. Only, I just don't know who they are. The boy . . . he hasn't come in for weeks. Without the treatment he'll die. And you . . . you're the first person who's even acknowledged his existence.”

Eileen was breathing heavily, still staring at Susan, confusion and fear distorting her acute, strikingly attractive features. The hazel iris around her pupils sparkled like a fiery corona. Then she figured it out and let out a twisted laugh. “Boy, you good, you know that. Almost had me. But I'll give you the benefit a my doubt. What you said just now, you can quit worrying 'bout that. Where Tyrone's gone, Doctor— and may that poor kid rest in peace— he won't be needing no more your genuine concern or your miracle cure. And may Bentley and all a you burn in hell for that.”

17

SHE FOUND HIM in one of the most feared places in the hospital— the AIDS Isolation Unit. And she, who ought to know better, was only in scrubs, unprotected, moving in a dream, among the most unfortunate of all those with AIDS. Here, in the AIU, were interned those diagnosed with the Devil's Alliance, one of the most dreaded of all disease combinations.

The resurgence of TB in New York had come with a deadly twist: A new form of TB, multiple drug resistant TB or MDR-TB, had become a major health problem for the authorities since the late nineteen-nineties. TB was already a difficult disease to treat. But MDR-TB was well nigh impossible to cure. And when the immune-compromised AIDS patients contracted it, the combination of ills became a crisis, a death sentence, for they had what was cruelly nicknamed the Devil's Alliance. To make matters worse, since early 2007 an even deadlier form of TB had emerged in New York and began spreading rapidly through the inner city ghettos. Termed XDR-TB for Extreme Drug Resistant TB, this strain was virtually incurable and far more easily spread than MDR-TB. The epicenter of this new strain had been traced back to a rural South African village called Tugella Ferry and to the Church of Scotland Hospital there.

Even to seasoned physicians, the AIU was an eerie stop in their hectic days. This afternoon Susan found it particularly gloomy. Heavily geared personnel stared as she rushed past flouting strict protocol. She was breathing the deadly air separated from the population only by sealed high windows from which the city below appeared cold, grey, bereft of soul.

Spotting her, Jason started out swiftly, motioning toward the exit and the safety

of the quiet corridor beyond. He frowned through clear plastic, gesturing at her scrubs.

She ignored the admonishing look and reached for him. "Oh, Jason. I just spoke with Griffiths. The teenager's dead. Just like Helen. You've got to help me figure what's going on. I beg you."

He held up a hand, staying well back from her. "Look, it's late. Just go home, get some rest. You're too emotional right now." He gestured back at the ward. "I'll cover for you and we'll talk tomorrow. Okay? But not here. I promise."

She nodded, reluctantly started to leave then turned back.

"Wait, Jason. You've been here since the beginning of the trials. I've seen you with Poole, Nyland, the 'old guard'. Have they mentioned anything? Is there a problem with the therapy?" She described her last session with Laura, the troubling symptoms.

Jason looked up and down the corridor, before shaking his head.

"What can I say? If we weren't gagged by this top secret industrial espionage stuff, we'd all be on CNN, and every talk show in the nation lauding the new post-AIDS era in medicine, marveling about the results we're getting with SW500. There's nothing about this miracle I can tell you that you haven't witnessed yourself."

18

THE VIOLET HOUR had overtaken the jagged skyline. Despite the upsetting events of the day, Susan felt warm and calm now, perhaps a touch euphoric. She'd written herself a prescription before leaving the hospital, filled it at the dispensary and taken the stash in her tiny office. She was starting to need higher doses for effect, but it didn't matter. Her dependency was a direct result of the stress she was under. Several times a day now she needed medication. Occasionally she secured herself some IV barbiturates from the medicine trolleys momentarily left unattended in the wards, some Nitrous Oxide inhalation from the OR when the nurses were busy. This was therapy. Not abuse, she told herself. Far better than becoming a snow or heroine junkie, like some of the physicians she knew. She had it all under control, she told herself.

For a while, out in the chill of the gloaming, all was peace as the wind hummed against her helmet, her blood running warm and the bike roaring beneath her.

At Riverview Mews, however, her wariness returned. Crossing the badly lit parking lot to her ground floor apartment on the north side of the building, she jumped from her own shadow and that of the great red oak that swayed in the wind.

Hearing sounds as she neared her front door, she quickened her step, then stopped, glanced over her shoulder. The lot was quiet, empty. And yet . . .

What was happening to her? She'd just ridden past old man Marcus's guardhouse at the entrance and all was well.

Fumbling for keys in her purse, she heard footsteps behind her and knew they were real. She grabbed the mace on her key chain, hairs bristling on her neck. Just as she got her door open and stepped in, she heard a voice. It belonged to a specter by the

oak tree—half-lit by the dim incandescence of the yellowed lamps in the lot.

“Dr Conner. Sorry if I startled you.” Nurse Griffiths’ eyes held a feral gleam. “Ol’ timer at the gate said it was all right when I showed my tags. Besides . . . he knows me.” Her look suggested Susan might know why. She began stepping closer.

Susan held onto the mace. Her heart raced.

Close up, though, the nurse appeared pathetic, ragged. She’d clearly been sweating despite the cold, her skin shimmered in the dappled light, her features stood out in high relief. Susan could see she’d been crying.

“I . . . I came to apologize . . . for the way I acted before.”

“You’re obviously under a lot of stress.”

“Yeah. But I had to explain. I was way outta line this afternoon. I was half way home when I figured you not one a them . . . you seemed real genuine, you know.”

“How’d you know where I live, Eileen?”

“Place belongs to NYU— for doctors from outta town. And, in case you haven’t noticed, all the members a your team fit that category.”

Susan nodded. “Well, it’s freezing, Eileen. And I don’t believe you spent all that time out here waiting to apologize. There’s something you want to tell me, isn’t there?”

The nurse appeared hesitant, wrestling with her thoughts before she nodded.

“Yeah. But . . . it’s . . . it’s just—”

Susan held out a hand. “It’s okay. Come on in and let’s talk over coffee.”

Griffiths considered the offer. Then shook her head. “Indoors? I don’t think so.”

Sighing, Susan pulled her jacket zipper up and stepped down to the nurse.

Griffiths backtracked, restless as a hunted animal. She glanced over her shoulder then back. Susan placed a hand on the nurse’s folded arms.

“Tell me what’s on your mind Eileen. You can talk to me.”

"No, nothing like that, Dr Conner. Like I said, you looked— I guess you *look* like someone who cares . . . and I thought, maybe you'd understand, won't say a word to them. Don't know what I'd do if they came after me again."

"Oh, for Chrissakes. Not that 'they' and 'them' nonsense again. It's so frustrating that it's become downright silly. I wish you'd just say it out in the open, please. Just tell me what's wrong."

"What's wrong is I said some things I shouldn't have— about Tyrone, and about the doctors in the Unit. Please, I been under a lot of pressure lately. If I said something crazy, you gotta forget about it. Many at the hospital think I know stuff because I talk to the patients. With all the voluntary work, I'm everybody's friend out there, you know. But these are sick people . . . they die. Fact a life. And simple folks just like to blame it on doctors. Somebody has to be blamed, I guess."

"So if it's nothing why're you here trying to convince me to keep your words a secret? I'm not the enemy, Eileen. You can talk to me about it."

Griffiths uncrossed her arms. "Just hear me out first, Doc. Ever since I got the news about that kid, I been really freaked, is all. He was run over by a bus not two blocks from the hospital. Was crazy the way it happened. And the stuff Harvey told me—" She pressed a hand to her mouth as though she'd uttered something she shouldn't have. "Anyway, if you not the enemy and wanna help me, you gotta promise to not repeat anything I said today." Her eyes wavered. She half-turned. "I have to go now, Dr Conner. Have to get my baby from the neighbor's. She's all I got and I can't risk losing her."

Turning around, Griffiths jogged off into the darkness, disappearing in mid-conversation for the second time in a day.

19

Thursday 21 November

SUSAN READ THE signs passing by her window as the cab cruised northward, leaving the familiarity of central Manhattan behind. They crossed the Harlem River and continued on a wide street called Melrose, passing by the Lincoln Medical Center. When she began seeing names including Bronx— *Bronx Lebanon Hospital, Cross Bronx Expressway*, she understood why Eileen's colleagues at the nurses' station this morning had said, "Believe me, Doc, you better off waitin till tomorrow when she comes in."

The cabby had taken some wrong turns, backing up out of streets more than once, or making illegal U-turns. Now and then, he checked a map, gave her furtive glances in the mirror. She wondered why taxis were not equipped with GPS.

The neighborhood became bleaker, layers of grey and neglect, the dereliction of buildings stark and grotesque against the pale morning sky. They passed what looked like a series of junkyards, decrepit structures with a forlorn, abandoned feel, closed in by lengths of rusted cyclone fencing.

Finally, the cab stopped outside a run-down tenement that formed an island of concrete in a sea of grounded auto hulks. The driver turned around, handed her the note with Nurse Griffiths' address.

"This be it, right here."

She scanned the area. "You're sure?"

She thought it odd that Eileen would choose to live in a place like this. Hesitating a moment, she toyed with the idea of phoning the nurse, then thought against it. This was not the kind of subject she thought Eileen would entertain on the phone.

Before leaving the cab, she took several pills from the knapsack and swallowed.

The cabby eyed her in the mirror. "You be careful, now, y'hear."

"Wait here, please."

"Suit yourself. Meter's runnin' tho'." He depressed locks and wound up his window the moment she stepped away.

A vandalized lobby and four flights of urine-reeking stairs later, she knocked on Eileen's door. A series of deadbolts unhitched before the nurse appeared in the doorway, a child straddling her hips. She stared, incredulous.

Susan opened her mouth, but the nurse shushed her. Removing keys, Griffiths stepped out into the corridor and closed the door behind her. She looked remarkably younger than in her uniform. Was barefoot, dressed in faded blue denim hip hugger jeans and an old white cropped top that exposed her flat midriff. A pierced-navel centerpiece completed the picture.

The child was about two, her hair fashioned in tiny braids adorned with peach ribbons. Large Bambi eyes that hooked Susan immediately.

"Hey gorgeous," Susan whispered, reaching out to the girl's cheek.

Griffiths pushed the hand away, set the child down at her feet. And studied the corridor. "What the hell you doing here, Doc? Who brought you?"

"I got the address from one of your colleagues and took a cab."

"Then you gotta be dumb or outta your mind coming out here."

"Just desperate, Eileen. The way you ran off last night then didn't show at the hospital this morning hardly left me any choice. You were the third person that's gone crazy on me in just as many weeks, and I just couldn't stand it anymore. Professor Bentley would have me believe Tyrone was a figment of my imagination. Dr Wells, whose patient appears to have suffered the same fate as Tyrone, sounded almost as

terrified as you did last night.”

Susan swatted at flies buzzing near her face. She looked down the dimly-lit walkway and crinkled her nose. Filth and ruin were evident all around them. The place was redolent with smells of rotting food and littered with piles of trash that residents had not bothered taking downstairs.

“You get used to the smell after a while.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean— ”

“It’s all right, Doc. I know. Ironically, this is the only place I feel safe from those murderers. Wherever I lived, the good places, they’d come and cause the kinda problems that’d get me kicked out. Here, they might watch and listen, but there’s precious little they can do to make me leave. Central Park West, this ain’t, but it’s become my sanctuary.” She laughed the humorless laugh Susan recognized. “Sure, they can kill me, like Harvey. And they can kill my baby or, Lord forbid, just take her away, like they threatened to, because a what they think I have that can bring ’em down.”

“Dr Harvey Leland was murdered? By whom? What’s going on, Eileen?”

“No need to ask, Dr Conner. No need. You come out here. Least I can do is tell you what I know. Yesterday . . . the way you took the news about the kid. I— ” Eileen drew a breath and held it, shaking her head, fighting back emotion that plainly showed on her face. “I always prayed for somebody to come along, who cared, you know. You must be an angel or something, ’cause— ” Eileen broke off suddenly, went after her little girl, who’d toddled over to the edge of the stairs. “Jesus Christ, sweetheart, you know you can’t go there. Bad girl!” Eileen scooped up the child. She managed a wan smile, waved the little girl’s chubby hand in Susan’s face. “Say ‘hello’ to the lovely lady. C’mon, now, say ‘hello’.”

The child threw a quick glance then plunged into her mother’s neck, giggling.

“Hey, poppet. I’m Susan. What’s your name?”

Eileen coaxed the child, who peeked from under her long lashes. “Amy. Amee.”

“Short for Amelia,” Eileen explained. “Harvey was crazy about her. Even though he wasn’t her real Daddy . . . Had his own family. But I’m sure you already knew that. Three beautiful daughters, a wife. Lord, I felt the guilt every day. But I loved my man, you know. Loved the way he loved me back, which blinded me to so much.”

She noticed Susan’s blank expression and explained.

“Fell in love with him the first day he stepped into that hospital. Everybody knew. I guess that confirms your innocence. Anyway, I can still remember the terrible night it happened . . . He’d been pacing in my living room all evening. I had a place in the East Eighties then. Didn’t fully understand what was going down. Harvey had some kinda understanding with the FBI. Was gonna meet with them, deliver a package containing proof of some horrible thing he’d found at the hospital– something about the trials. Left my place about nine. Called me three times that night. The last call from his cell phone . . . only minutes before he– they– killed him. I can still hear his terrified voice. He kept muttering about it being a race against time, a race for his life. I begged him to drive to the nearest precinct house, talk to the cops. Harvey just laughed, said they were no good. ‘Why d’you think I’m going to the Feds?’ he said.

“‘They’ were on his back, watching, listening,’ he said. Bugged his phones, his office, his home, my apartment. Got to a stage, he could sense a shadow everywhere he went. That night, he wore his anguish and his fear like a twisted mask. I see that face in my nightmares. I see him in the Porsche he loved so much– his silver dream racer he called it– all alone, more afraid than he’d ever been in his life . . . O God, Harvey.”

Eileen broke into a fit of sobbing.

Susan looked desperate, her impatience unbearable. “What was it, Eileen? What

did he find?" But the nurse wasn't listening, wasn't there, her gaze as deep as a trance.

Amy was bewildered. Her lips curled as she clutched her mother's neck.

"He called me from the desk phone at *Julia Loon's*, our favorite restaurant. His voice had sounded so strange, like breaking glass. I- I can't explain that, but it's how I remember it, you know. He said he was about to make contact with his new friend in the FBI. I begged him to be careful. Told him how much I loved him . . .

"Last I heard from Harvey, was from the car. He was on the speaker phone- the echo. Was yelling, muttering a confusion of words about how they'd duped him, taken him someplace, tortured him with his eyes taped open. He'd gotten into the wrong car at the rendezvous. Someone else had picked him up instead of the agents . . .

"I heard Harvey's screams just before I heard the crash. The phone went dead. He'd been yelling about the brakes not being there, about the huge truck he couldn't avoid as he came down to traffic lights at the end of the highway exit ramp."

Eileen blinked, seeming to emerge from her trance. She became aware of the sobbing child, began comforting her.

Susan reached out, stroked the baby's back. "What did he find?"

The nurse shrugged. "It was like this bad thing just fell out of the sky, right into our lives. One day everything was fine. And the next, there was Harvey, coming through my door, slumping on my sofa, looking really terrible. I could always tell straight off when he was having a bad day at work and this time he looked worse than ever. In retrospect, of course, I can tell it'd been building for weeks. But that evening Harvey looked me in the eye and said his whole world was coming down on him. He'd discovered something so bad in the CRU, he couldn't even talk about it. Didn't wanna elaborate for my safety. Said his career was over. As Bentley's second-in-command, he had access to the records. He'd found out this 'thing', complained to Bentley. But the

Professor insisted Harvey was wrong, that he was making a dangerous mistake.

"Bentley had been livid. He warned Harvey to keep his big mouth shut or he'd get them both killed. Harvey didn't let up . . . and then he began getting the threatening calls. He asked me to help him Xerox files he'd sneak out of the CRU from time to time. I did. But, eventually, after the first few times, it became harder because someone was always watching him at the hospital. And then, just as I thought things couldn't get any worse, Harvey said something that began to drive me crazy. One evening he came in, told me he'd uncovered the most incredible thing, which convinced him his life was in grave danger. He said he'd discovered the White House was involved, and he knew for sure that patients were being murdered. It just frustrated me that Harvey wouldn't reveal the details. And it's what led me to believe my man was losing it."

Eileen bit her lip. "He was never the same in the next few days till his death, and I had a lot to do with that. He was talking about stuff that sounded too fantastic for me. He looked like he was headed for a nervous breakdown, paranoid at every turn, believing that he was totally 'wired', that they were watching his every move, listening in on him all the time. We couldn't even make love anymore because 'somebody' was in the room with us."

"And so he contacted the FBI, made a deal with them," Susan said.

"He said he had to. The cops couldn't be trusted."

They suddenly heard music and Eileen stopped speaking. They turned to the stairs as the music got louder. Presently, a boy of about twelve or thirteen appeared there, a large boombox resting on his shoulder. Familiar rap blared from its speakers. Susan stiffened, trying to see if the youth was one of the dopers from downstairs.

The boy abruptly stopped close by and swore at no one in particular. He set down the boombox, turned it off and started patting down his pockets, muttering loudly

that he'd forgotten his keys. Then he spun on his heels and went down the stairs.

Eileen waited till the sound of the boy's footsteps had died down before going on. "I thought Harvey was crazy, but now I know how he must've felt. He'd given me this sweeper to check for bugs 'n stuff. I used to find one or two every other day, take them out, but new ones would keep popping up when I left. This whole bunch a locks didn't mean a thing to them. Now I don't find anything. I don't know if the bugs got smarter or the machine's broke. It's hard to be sure anymore if they're listening or not. It's been like that ever since Harvey died. They think I have the files, and as long as they believe that, I'm a risk they just can't let up on."

Susan arched an eyebrow. "Do you?"

Eileen moistened her lips, then nodded. She leaned closer, whispered, "But not here, I don't . . . In a locker at Grand Central." Her eyes suddenly welled. She squeezed them shut and laughed. "Oh boy." Tears spontaneously flowed again, tumbling unhindered down her cheeks. "That was a relief."

Susan waited as Eileen lowered her head, gathered herself. She felt she should be doing something, showing her sympathy, but she was too absorbed, impatient for Eileen to go on. She felt a kind of suppressed, perverse jubilation at the knowledge that the mystery was finally surfacing, that she wasn't crazy after all.

She studied the nurse, reflecting on how the woman had behaved in the ER, how frightened she'd been at the apartment last night. Everything sounded fantastic, yet the pain, the fear was chillingly real. She patted Eileen on the arms, rubbed the child's back.

Eileen looked up, her face dark. "Harvey had planned to take the FBI to the files. He gave me a duplicate key, which I was to hand over to the Feds if anything ever happened to him. Little Amy here's what keeps me from making a move. They made it quite clear what they'd do to her if I did have anything, and if I even thought of going

somewhere with it. After what happened to Harvey, I just don't have the heart for this anymore. When I heard about Tyrone, I just went crazy, felt I had to do something. But one look at little Amy here and I lost all my resolve."

Susan thought of Nate and understood Griffiths' emotional trial. How difficult it must've been for Eileen to have spoken to her, to have revealed Leland's story. She understood the mother's pain, the lover's grief, and she *felt* it too, as she stepped closer and embraced both mother and child.

"I'm so sorry for your loss and your pain, Eileen. Harvey was a good man. Perhaps his efforts will not have been in vain."

They remained that way for a while, in the gloom of the corridor with its pungent odors, until the grief subsided. Then Eileen set down the child at her feet, wiped her tears and made Susan a promise.

20

OUTSIDE ON THE dusty sidewalk, in a row of abandoned and rusting cars, was a gray beat up Mazda van with blacked-out windows. The vehicle stood out no more than any other colorless thing in the spiritless environment, and so Eileen came and went each day without paying it any mind. She never noticed its two occupants who recorded the routine of her life with curious, detailed monotony. If she did, she might never have been as free with her revelations to Susan Conner as she had.

One of the occupants, the man seated in the back seat, was a stout, balding Latino, whose residual clumps of hair sprouted like moldy cauliflowers over the earphones covering his ears. He chewed on a stick of beef jerky and spat with regularity into a small can at his side. Occasionally he adjusted dials on a console set into one wall of the van filled with an array of state-of-the-art audio equipment. At this moment, he took another bite of the jerky, paused in mid-chew, then glanced over his shoulder.

"Not so good, but is something the boys can work on. Here, listen," he said with a heavy accent. Lifting a spare pair of headphones from a makeshift hook on the console, he held it out to the man in the front passenger seat.

Smoking a French cigarette, the second occupant listened for ten minutes. Then, spotting something outside, he threw back the earphones and sat upright.

"Whaddaya know. Here's the bitch. Comin' out to the cab."

The cigarette bobbed at the edge of his lips as he spoke. He dragged on it deeply, swallowed, then exhaled, smoke streaming out through his nostrils. He had greasy slicked-back hair and a large head that indented the padded roof of the van even with the seat set at its lowest. He had a square jaw that jutted out when he grinned,

distorting his pockmarked face. It was a Cheshire cat grin more menacing than humorous. "Yeah, it's the Doc for sure." He'd already called in the description when they'd realized the nurse had a visitor. His cell phone had rung exactly ten minutes after that with a name, and instructions.

Lowering his head to spy through the slit in the side window, he caressed a Smith and Wesson .40 in his lap. The sun peeking out from behind the clouds in the patchy sky, glinted off the lenses of the doctor's glasses and brightened the air-force blue pantsuit she was wearing. The man licked his lips as he raised the gun and took aim for the doctor's heart, just as she reached the cab.

"Boom and you gone," he said.

Then to the Latino, "Follow the cab, Carlo."

21

THE BROAD MANHATTAN avenue made the place from which she'd just arrived seem like a bad dream. Hell and heaven just fifteen minutes apart. Already, she could feel the infusion of serenity she associated with the place of books. Above her, the imposing building with its French-Style facade took up an entire block on Fifth Avenue between West 42nd and West 40th Streets. This morning the blue flags of the New York Public Library were limp over the white lettering, but the marble lions guarding the entrance strong, regal, assuring.

Eileen's bombshell revelation had left Susan's mind reeling, chaotic. As always, this was the best place to bring order to her thoughts. Earlier, she'd told Maureen she'd be back for her CRU session. Now she had no intention of returning until after lunch.

During the ride to the city, Eileen's words had felt increasingly fantastic to her. In the midst of the rundown tenement's filth and stench, listening to the nurse had been almost surreal. And yet, somehow, she could relate.

For wasn't that the nature of things at the extremity?

Astronauts, courageous pioneers of the cosmos, were rooted in the mundane—the reality of training, medical and fitness tests, family life, the earth beneath their feet. Yet in space they courted the incredible. Beyond their insulated windows lay the edge of human imagination, where their lives became movie scripts. Medical scientists working at the cutting edge were no different. SW500, a case in point. It was a journey into an uncharted dimension of medicine. And she was a part of the crew.

Hadn't the "dead" risen and walked through the corridors of the CRU? This is my life. Feet mired in the mundane, while my mind hovered on the brink of fantasy.

Past a revolving door and into a huge hall, she submitted to a search by the guard before hurrying up two flights of stairs. Inside the library, a place that had already become a haunt of hers since coming to New York, Susan got an access card before heading straight for the computer section. Seated before a terminal, she paused, fingers against her temples, eyes closed, mulling the events of the last twenty-four hours. Tentatively at first, and then with more purpose, she logged on and began digging into the archival material, slowly gathering a rough database, a frame of reference.

Taking out her spiral pocket notebook from the backpack, she turned to a new page, flattened the tiny book, and jotted down—

<u>Company</u>	<u>Hypothesis</u>	<u>SW 500 →Trials</u>
– <i>Company— Sloane-Wright</i>		
	– <i>Hypothesis— eradication of retrovirus from human tissue— ‘in silico’ work.</i>	
– <i>Discoverer / Principal Scientist / Team — ????</i>		

She paused again, tried to jog her own memory of events.

± 2 years ago.

Confounding, controversial hypothesis.

Press termed it The New York Hypothesis

She Googled ‘THE NEW YORK HYPOTHESIS’ and a raft of results filled the screen. Most of them were unrelated to her subject. She scrolled through until she came across one which included the term ‘AIDS cure’ and ‘radical theory’ . . .

It was an archived *New York Times* article. She read the first paragraph and paused. There’d been a lone scientist— one Dr Vincent Sebastian Bach. Mentally, she replayed the name, then whispered it. Inexplicably, it made her smile. She found herself speed reading through the lines and learned that he was a maverick scientist who’d qualified as a MD before branching into research, notching up multiple Ph.D.’s— in Bioinformatics, Genomics, Microbiology, Computer Science— before the age of twenty.

Wow, he blew the mind. And yet—she shook her head as she covered the part about the night of the AIDS conference, Sarty’s jibes, the jeering and public humiliation of the walkout . . . *After those sensational claims and the public snub by the international scientific community, the young scientist had withdrawn from the public eye . . .*

“Dear God,” she whispered, “What scientist wouldn’t hide after that kind of debut?” Her curious empathy for this stranger was rapidly supplanted by her own guilt at remembering nothing of this news. A deep ache in her belly and an acute craving gave her the answer. Discreetly dry swallowing some pills, she recalled how ‘out of it’ she’d been at the time, her life had been in turmoil. There’d been Robert’s high profile organized crime case against the dreaded DuValle brothers. Their personal lives had become hell as Robert worked round the clock. And as the trials reached a crucial stage they’d begun getting death threats via telephone, which Robert in his characteristic old world manner had played down. “Those rogues would never think to go after the DA,” he’d reassured her. *And yet—Susan wiped a tear—you were wrong, weren’t you Robert? No office however high is safe from the reach of desperate, evil men.*

Inhaling deeply, she resumed her search through online archives for the *Times*, the *Post*, the *Daily News*, the tabloids. Gleaning the gist of reports, she scribbled notes as she went along.

Photos of the scientist were surprisingly rare. Those she found were strangely unclear. In some, his features were totally obscured by some kind of bright light, in others there was a hand or the brim of a baseball cap hiding his face. Curiously, she even found an article on the scientist titled, *The Camera-Shy Prodigy*.

Next, she typed ‘SW500’. Of the few results, most were articles of the promotional press-release variety: controlled information offered by Sloane-Wright who’d obtained FDA approval for clinical trials. Information was scant. Not

surprisingly: *The company was in the process of obtaining a battery of worldwide patents.* She checked the Sloane-Wright Website. It was a journey into the fantastic, the myriad research projects, their accomplishments, but little on SW500, except that it was a new nanotech-based genetic therapy for the treatment of AIDS undergoing trials at the NYU Medical Center. The only blemish, the news about AsthEze.

Both fascinated by his genius and truly intrigued, Susan found herself returning to the references of the scientist again. Imagining his presentation at Jacob Javits, the peer ridicule, she felt herself endeared to this stranger who'd lost both parents to AIDS. He'd lost his first job at Grant-Sinclair Labs and had then joined Sloane-Wright Biotech. Did he still work at Sloane-Wright? she wondered. *And why haven't I heard more of this remarkable man?*

By midday, pangs of hunger urged her to log off and rise. Her eyes hurt after the hours of close work. She felt uncommonly weary, in a state of limbo as she walked through the vast two-blocks-long Main Reading Room en route to the exit.

Outside, squinting in the patchy sunlight, she descended the stairs to Fifth Avenue. There was still time, she decided, to check out Grand Central, the "lockers", and get a bite to eat. As she paused on the sidewalk to get her bearings, she had an odd sense of being watched and instinctively turned to see a large man staring at her. Leaning against the stone plinth of the lion, he smiled. But the menace in his shadowed eyes sent a shudder through her.

Blinking, she turned away and hurried down 42nd Street, chiding herself for making eye contact with a stranger. At Grand Central Station, she entered and headed straight for the circular Central Information booth under the great domed roof.

"Sorry, Ma'am," the attendant informed her. "No lockers no more. Not for years. Threat of terrorism, bombs in lockers and such. But there's a Lost and Found

Parcel Room downstairs. Close to track 100, next to the police station. You might wanna check that out.”

Susan frowned. Had she misheard Eileen?

As she turned for the stairs, she stopped mid-stride and gasped. It was the weird guy from outside the library again. He had a face you couldn’t miss—pockmarked, greasy, huge forehead. Though he wasn’t looking at her, she was rattled, her senses going on alert. Immediately she recalled the mantra of a young martial arts teacher in Boston and she controlled her breathing, took the stairs slowly, urging herself to be calm and vigilant, to be prepared for danger

After the tragedy back home, part of her therapy to overcome the phobia she’d developed of strangers, of being alone on the streets, was the series of self-defense classes she’d undertaken on the advice of her therapist. “From breathing comes power. As long as you controlled that, maintained balance, didn’t panic and kept alert— any assailant at close range could be taken down or disarmed, giving you time to escape.”

Her heart thudded, yet she breathed evenly. On the lower level, she began casing out the place like a tourist, constantly vigilant for the face. Finally, she sat at one of the cafes, ordered coffee and a bagel, spent a long time watching the passersby until she felt comfortable again.

A little after 1:15 PM, she quickly checked out the Lost and Found/Parcel Room, the platforms, and the different levels, before hailing a cab for the short ride down to the Medical Center on First Avenue.

22

Edward Alderon Styles, Sloane-Wright Biotech,

THE ROUTE TO his twentieth-floor office in Sloane-Wright's glass-and-steel international headquarters, took Styles through granite, marble and exotic wood lobbies, and up crystal elevators that would put those of the Marriott and Sheraton to shame. It was a short, but pride-filled daily journey. And, if his expression was anything to go by— a ritual of love.

This afternoon, after a busy morning in the conference room with architects and engineers, studying blueprints for the new Sloane-Wright pharmaceutical plant in Cape Town, South Africa, Styles felt a tightening of his chest as he glanced at the latest financials on his desk. Every day the AsthEze fiasco drained the company's coffers even further. He prayed the next few months with his new miracle would pass quickly and without further hitches. Thank God his band of loyal men was on the ball. Leland was history. By now, Moran would've taken care of Wells. Tomorrow, as promised, Styles would make a sizeable donation to the St Philomena's Orphanage and there should be no hurdles for a while—

And that's when he remembered her— the bitch, the newbie, the fucking Harvey Leland in the making. He balled his fists, knuckles turning white. No hurdles except for Dr Susan Conner, whom he'd greatly underestimated. At least she was unstable, desperate and in need. People like that yielded easily under pressure. Hopefully, she could be converted. And his outfit could be spared another messy, risky solution.

Styles took a pen and jotted the doctor's name and an offering on scented, saffron paper. At the alcove, he crossed himself, addressed the Virgin Mary, lit a candle

before the Crucifix and placed the paper at the shrine, whispering his wish.

Moments later, at his vast windows, Styles' gaze was hopeful. Perhaps the mistakes of the past would not come back to haunt the company. He winced as the facial muscles under his lost eye were gripped by a powerful spell of twitching.

"Dammit!" He swore. Then, staring out over the vista of the Hudson beyond the sun-gilded cityscape, into the past, he appeared to relive the terrific pain of a time when he'd stared annihilation in the face. AsthEze, Sloane-Wright's Asthma pump, which had become the world's most popular and most innovative nonsteroidal Asthma therapy, had given them ascendancy once. But more than two decades after its debut, it had turned out to be their near ruin. The company was in the process of paying out a billion dollars in damages after AsthEze had been linked to hundreds of deaths spanning a period of twenty-five years. The withdrawal from sale of the brand had already cost the colossus billions. Money for new projects was almost nonexistent. To fund SW500, he'd dug into every hidden vault, called in every favor, blackmailed every weak-kneed schmuck bank manager he'd had a hold on. If the therapy didn't make it out the door soon, Sloane-Wright and he would be history.

Which made the so called do-gooders like Wells and Conner mere trifles.

Behind him a desk phone trilled and Styles walked over, depressed the speaker button and gazed annoyingly at the attached thin film display unit. Static 'crackled' on screen. He arched his eyebrow and glared at the distorted image there.

"Goddammit Michael, replace that obsolete unit of yours already."

Moran's fuzzy mug muttered an apology. "Got some local updates, Boss . . ."

"Encryption Michael?"

"Highest level as always."

Nevertheless, Styles made some checks on the digital display of his comm setup.

He always used a secure line. Fanatical by nature Styles realized precautions were an essential part of his competitive and risky world. "Okay, what's up?"

"Troubleshooting hiccups at the hospital. Wanted to bounce something off ya."

"I get nervous when you use so many euphemisms in a row, Michael. I thought you'd already taken care of matters by now."

"That was Wells, Boss. This is about Conner. She's making me real nervous. Woman's getting a little too adventurous for a mild-mannered physician. After her meet with the nurse this AM . . ." Moran filled Styles in on Susan's activities since she'd left Eileen's. "I can fix this if you want, just gimme the word."

Styles felt an odd sense of *déjà vu*. Moran had asked him this question just after the Leland episode. And he'd refused. Unlike the patients, he never liked personnel taken out in tandem. It raised too many eyebrows. In retrospect, he should've dealt with the nurse long ago. Something he should now do with the pesky Dr Conner. But there were complications. For one thing she carried too much baggage—from the death of her former assistant DA husband and child, to the fact that the FBI investigation into those deaths were still ongoing. If she were found dead, the media would not let it go—

"Boss?"

Styles cleared his throat. "Has the nurse talked? Any word on the package?"

"She's smart. They talked outside the apartment. Our guys got in a remote device when they figured what was happening. Unfortunately the bug in a boombox was a mite outta range. Lots of background. Getting the recordings analyzed as we speak. Thing is, the doc was too purposeful out there, you know . . ."

"And you're convinced something's up?"

"I'm thinking she could be real trouble if she stays in the game." There was a pause. "I can take care of this, Boss . . ."

Yeah, just gimme the word. Styles grimaced. That's how easy it could be. He instinctively stared at his hands, curled his fingers in disgust then looked away and began wiping them against his jacket.

Jesus. He felt dizzy, sank into his chair. Every time he gave the word it felt like he was there with the dying Ramon and Father O'Malley all over again. Yet there was no stopping. Not until he finally made things right with the world, saved the millions of souls and finally redeemed himself before his Lord.

"Okay, Michael," he finally said. "But it's too soon after Wells. See if there's a way to keep her away from the ball for a bit. All we need is a little more time. Be creative with this one, okay. And if all else fails, if there's an exchange . . . *if* there's a chance the files might surface, you got the word. Understand?"

23

IT WAS JUST AFTER 1.45 PM when Susan entered Virology, thinking what she'd say to Bentley about being late and how she'd catch up on her patient service and the Trials Sessions, when she was flagged down by an ashen-faced Maureen.

"Dr Conner, dear. Are you all right?"

Susan nodded. "Yes, Maureen. Why . . . what's wrong?"

"Well, I'm not sure. It's just that . . . i-in the last hour everything's gone crazy up here—people going in and out of the Chief's suite. And he— coming out here and asking after you, looking something furious. Said to send you in the moment you got here."

Susan frowned. "What'd you say?"

"That you'd called in sick, but would make the afternoon session."

"You did good. Thanks. Now let's see what this is about."

Susan turned for Bentley's suite, but Maureen stopped her once again. Biting her lip, the receptionist gave a quick shake of the head and gestured toward a short, wood-paneled corridor perpendicular to the one leading to Bentley's office.

Susan felt her mouth go dry. "You sure?"

The receptionist nodded. "I'm sorry."

Looking down the corridor she felt her heart pound, her knees starting to give.

Oh Lord, not in there, please. Not the Halpern Room.

She'd been here long enough to come to dread the place. There was something medieval about it, something cold, merciless. It's where the urgent or serious staff meetings took place— around the large, oval hardwood conference table. It's where the worst moments of a doctor's life were meted out— where their blunders came to haunt

them, where they heard of litigation against them, where doctors were told of punitive transfers to institutions so far away from New York and any city that they were as good as dead. Nothing good ever took place there.

Approaching the double doors, she noticed one of them ajar and heard voices above a murmur. Like the drone of hornets.

They were seated on one side, facing the door, facing her, five high-ranking officials— legal, admin, clinical— including the Chief. They were people she passed in foyers, in corridors, got memos from, or was addressed by in meetings. Suits that rarely traversed the clinical regions of the hospital, had little meaning in her existence, her routine— until now. A confraternity of the corrupted, she thought, sensing ill with that same intuition that signaled only trouble. She wished she'd thought to take some meds before walking in here. Her heart pounded. She tried to still her shaking

The atmosphere was solemn. Grim faces, dark suits, stiff-collared shirts bisected by bold ties, bright white starched lab coats. Somber stares.

Bentley raised his head first.

"Ah, the prodigal doctor returns," he observed, in his quasi English style, looking every inch the Oxford don he wasn't. None of them stood as Bentley went on. "So glad you could make it in this afternoon, Dr Conner." Turning to the men, he began introducing them: "Dr Steiner our legal counsel, Dr Wardman, our managing . . ."

She listened to every word, every name, title, and formal job description Bentley enunciated for her benefit, but heard nothing. Her mind raced ahead, speculating on reasons for the meeting, struggling to stay interested after the morning she'd had. She considered the events that had led to this point. Only days ago when Bentley had put her on probation she'd thought it was all over.

Now she was in the Halpern Room for God's sake.

Ordered to sit before them, she did. Joan of Arc at the inquisition. Gingerly, she stared ahead at the faces in turn: A shaking of heads. Condemnation. Bentley motioned to someone, who took up in legalese, reminded her of the detailed confidentiality documents she'd signed when taking up her post, the restraint of trade, her promise to uphold the ideals of the program. They recounted her repeated transgressions in the CRU and Bentley's leniency in the last few weeks. She was silent until Bentley mentioned the teenager. "We've only just heard the terrible news this morning and were saddened, too. But, we thought you should know it was a personal tragedy, an accident, nothing more, Dr Conner."

Susan was aghast. "B-But you claimed he didn't exist, Professor?"

Bentley's smile was a flash, transient as distant lightning. He shrugged. "The oversight of an extremely busy man, Dr Conner. I never know their names—only codes. I practice in the CRU exactly what I preach. I remind you once again that it was unethical and against protocol, your forming personal relationships with participants in a situation that demanded total objectivity."

The inquisition was a repeat of her meetings with Bentley for the confraternity's sake. They enquired about the meeting with Wells at the bar, her visiting the nurse.

"Sounds like a hidden agenda. Are you working for rivals, Dr Conner?"

Ignoring the question, Susan stared open-mouthed at their knowledge of her movements. She felt she was now falling into the same pit as Jason, Leland, Eileen— a terrifying thought. Her head throbbed, her stomach twisted into knots. As the heat of her craving intensified, her anger boiled over and she audibly moaned. All morning she'd visualized the mangled body of Tyrone, that innocent child from the projects, who'd been given the glimmer of hope, only to have it snuffed out with his life. She thought now about the persecution of Eileen, about Leland. She wanted to ask these

murderers how they had the nerve to point fingers at her.

Instead, she said, "Patients have been going missing from the trials, ending up dead somewhere. Every time I probe for answers, I come up against dead ends. I'm just trying to take care of my patients. Weird thing is that I'm the one being interrogated and accused of sinister activities when clearly something strange is going on in the CRU."

Bentley exchanged glances with the others. Then turned to her, bemused.

"Patients ending up dead? Strange goings on in our clinical trials? Are you saying we're murdering patients and faking experiments?"

Susan shook her head. "No, that's not wh—"

Bentley laughed, as did the others. "So we're the bad guys and you're the innocent crusader for patients' rights? Perhaps you should re-aim your stone, Doctor. Look to yourself, to the kind of physician *you* are— to the kind you've been."

Susan started to speak, but Bentley waved her silent as he slid a folder toward her. "Save it for after you've read this, Doctor. You might just want to edit your tirade. I tried to show you the error of your ways. But you've forced my hand."

Susan looked confused as she opened the file.

By the time she finished reading, her face had paled and become drawn. They were pulling the oldest trick in the book, she thought, gazing at Bentley with shame. If they got rid of her over the CRU 'infractions', there'd still be publicity, if she sued. The trials would be spotlighted in the media and there'd be awkward questions. So they'd compiled a dossier on her, highlighting indiscretions— drug abuse, malpractice, theft from the hospital and at the Aaron Diamond Clinic since her arrival here. What troubled her most were the entries of her problems at Mass General in Boston.

Trembling, she closed the file and folded her hands on her lap.

There was talk in the room, each member of the confraternity saying things

directed at her. They reminded her of the enormous cost of the clinical trials, the power of those behind SW500. They told her she was a liability that had to go.

Twenty-four hours.

Susan vaguely heard Bentley's voice above the thrumming in her ears. She felt light-headed. The room swirled. The words of Bentley and his crew were almost drowned by the din in her head.

By tomorrow this time she had to clear her desk and get out of the hospital. Her service would be transferred to another physician. In view of her slanderous allegations, she was lucky they weren't considering litigation.

Handing her over to the legal representative, Bentley rose, pointed his finger at her. "I'll deliver this dossier to the State Medical Board. Accuse us of unethical activity will you? Well, just see who'll hire you after this hits the fan, Doctor."

24

Brooklyn, New York

DEATH SAT IN the park near Greenpoint High like any other resident of working-class Brooklyn. This time he wasn't wearing the dark suit and tie, didn't display his diabolical grin. He was never the same character twice. That was his gift— the uncanny skill to slip into the face of everyman and become a part of the familiar unknowns.

Today he waited for the teenager called Laura O'Neal.

He knew her routine, knew she'd pass this way to her foster home. From the dossier that had come online, he'd learned everything about her. Over the last few days, he'd spent hours studying her life. Now, when she came into view, past the first copse of Maple standing at the entrance to the park, he saw her reach up, brush away strands of her red hair with the back of a pale hand. He smiled. He knew her well enough already to tell how many steps she'd take before she'd execute the gesture once again.

This hit would be as easy as the others, maybe as much fun as the black kid from the projects whom he'd enjoyed toying with in the final minutes. Roman smiled. Yeah. He liked to think he was death itself, come in many guises. This day he wore loose-fitting beige slacks, loafers, a silver-grey hairpiece under the Panama hat.

A harmless old-timer is what he was—benign as the birds that chirped about the kids that played on slides, swings, roundabouts, while their mothers, mostly hags gone to waste, gossiped in groups.

The girl would never suspect him, never expect the danger, just like the others. At least, not until it was too late, when she couldn't change the fall of the die.

25

THE GIRL WAS slightly built, auburn-haired and freckle-faced. A battle-hardened teenager about whom there was always a surprising air of serenity. Of course, it was just cautious silence, the quality of quiet vigilance, which she'd acquired from years of hardship and neglect.

Her father had been an abuser, a junky OD'd on Black, the new drug of choice for the indigent— cheap shit dredged from spill on the grimy floors of drug factories (flamed and smoked or jabbed straight up flaccid veins).

A mother she couldn't even remember.

Daddy would enter her room at night since she was little. A part of her life that remained mostly a blur on the neural landscape of her existence. Fear and pain was what she'd worn to bed each night. It was also the attire of her waking life, the clothes that had covered her throughout her day. One morning, aged eleven, she'd discovered her father's pale blue corpse in the bathroom tub, a syringe stuck up his arm, his eyes staring lifeless, at the stains on the opposite wall.

The Social Services people came by days later, took her into a group foster home, then into private foster care, soon after that.

When she'd started to lose weight, got the flu that would never leave, the one with the dreaded name, the one that ate into her body and her soul, leaving her with the breath of sparrows, her caseworker sent her to another foster home, this one for children with AIDS. And soon after that she'd won the lottery, the one where they chose people to take part in the new experimental treatment for AIDS.

Laura had made a remarkable recovery from her illness, had been able to return

to school, and lead an almost normal life thanks to her sessions in the CRU. However, for some weeks now, she'd been feeling strange. Just like the nightmares she used to have when it had all begun.

But she wasn't too worried about that. The small stuff was nothing compared with having the plague. Thank God, for that. Thank God, for the treatment.

Languishing at death's door had imbued her with a new respect for clichés. Like, 'You can never really appreciate something until you've lost it.' Of course, her life was far from perfect, but she valued it, loved it even, knowing that if you believed sincerely enough and desperately enough, miracles *did* come true.

As she entered the park, she heard the exuberant calls of little children. Bright colors and sounds against pale yellow whiskers of autumn grass. The warm dry earthy smell of leaves fermenting on the ground; trees beginning to expose their sparse underbellies. She looked further down the path at the crayon-colored toy sailboats on the muddy pond, an elderly loner on a bench, with the newspaper tucked under his arm. He returned a red, blue and white ball to one of the little kids. She smiled at him. He'd been here three days in a row. Maybe a long neglected dad brought to live with some guilt-ridden daughter or son. Well, he deserved a smile. She waved to his kindly face as she walked past.

It felt great to be alive.

The afternoon was like a painting that beckoned, drew you into its stilled reality. So beautiful, that Laura turned back once, twice, at the enduring image. The healthy would hardly look at it that way. She knew that. Once she'd been healthy, too.

As she headed past a shady stand of gnarled maple and spruce, a long-untended brush, and toward the far end of the park where grass submitted to concrete and blacktop, the old man whom she couldn't see now, stood up and followed her.

26

THE CONTENTS OF Susan's purse— pills, syringes, ampoules of barbiturates, most of them in hospital packaging lay on her desk. Filling a syringe with a meperidine/morphine mixture, she shot up and waited for the warm rush, the heady glow that elevated her from the burden of pain. But somehow today, it was different. The enormity of her predicament still seeped through, her intense shame and her guilt precipitating in tears.

She squirmed in her chair. *Dear God, what have I done?*

These were persons of repute, respected superiors, whose knowledge and experience far outclassed her own— and she'd accused them of heinous crimes. All based on mere hunches, hearsay, the mish-mash utterances of people too cowardly to do anything with their knowledge of evil. No, she had nothing to go on. Not a single thing that could justify her behavior.

Her head lolled. She moaned. Somewhere downstairs a roomful of patients waited whom she couldn't face. Especially now, after all that's happened. Even if she did, what was the use? She was effectively not a doctor anymore— all because of her own stupidity.

There was a way out, though, she thought, eyeing the syringe she'd just used. I could end it all now, make the pain and the shame go away.

Leaning forward she refilled the syringe, a dose that would put her into a sleep she'd never wake from. She jabbed the needle against her vein and began to press but her hand went limp. She began to sob. Once again, she realized she didn't have the courage to do it. The unknown always terrified her. What if the other side of this life

was a worse place? The drugs were only temporary, the crutches for her crippled self. At least they kept her within reach of the only world she knew. She kissed the syringe and put it away, then rose through the now dissipating cloud. Quitting was not her way.

Picking up her phone, she called Maureen, explained she was running late and would be in her service shortly. For now though, she needed a little time to ponder what was happening in her life, why it felt impossible to escape from this bog of misery. For as long as she could remember, her world had rarely been a happy one. Ever since the death of her father those years ago, mere existence had been hell— and not for lack of trying. Her emotional constitution had never equaled that of her intellect. She'd lived out her adolescence and early adulthood in the shadow of that tragic gray-green morning— what the cherubic and ample Pastor Gilbert had called, 'A test from God', at her father's funeral.

Well, if that had been a test, then the final exam was the Boston tragedy.

It's where the drugs came in:

Antidepressants in therapy had begun an odyssey that dragged her through a period where drugs became her only salvation at work and home. A single pill had the power to dispel the hurt and the pain, making it possible to look after a child through the marsh of her existence. And when it wore off, she had to have another. Then another, or else the clouds rolled in, all doors burst open to the lashing weather and the sounds of the storm, like a dozen shrill voices, would tear incessantly through her brain.

Then, the new life in New York. Initially, twenty-four and thirty-six-hour shifts, the futility of patients dying every day, the relentless fear of contracting the disease herself. There'd been mistakes. Some bad ones— like the death of her young patient at Mass General, in the weeks before she'd sought medical help. It had been the night they found her in the on call room, passed out, overdosed on antidepressants she'd lifted off

some medicine trolley in the ward. At the inquiry, her choices were limited: go into supervised therapy or face losing her license, or worse, a prison term. Yes, there'd been mistakes— even a fatal one— but never intentional. She was certainly no saint, but Bentley and his gang had taken things out of context, twisted situations to make things look nasty. The hushed second chances she'd got would be hushed no more.

It looked worse than the worst of times.

But, the Chief's smug smile when she'd crumbled in his eyes, had confirmed all her suspicions. And that made her spirit move within her being. Whatever her failings, whatever her self-suspected delusions, Jason was real, Eileen was real, and, by Bentley's own admission, Tyrone was real. After all that, if he thought she'd go gently into that good night, he had another thing coming. By taking everything away from her, he'd made her realize she had nothing to lose.

PROFESSOR BENTLEY'S silhouette dominated the gloom of his office. Pensive, he glanced at his watch, unable to believe it was only 2.25 P.M. How swiftly he'd played his hand— had taken less than thirty minutes to solve the problem of Conner for good. And thereby saved his own life.

Or had he? Hadn't he thought the same thing when he'd called her in that first time . . . and the second time . . . and the third?

Checking his trembling hands, he breathed deep to calm his racing heart. He couldn't recall how long ago it was that living, for him, had become a question of survival. This afternoon's meeting had gone perfectly, yet something niggled . . .

He remembered her eyes. During their meetings, especially the last, he'd seen something there which had caused him to fear the soul within. Her eyes held the kind of resolve— that infernal righteousness— that no amount of terror or dejection could subdue.

In trying to erase her effect here, he suspected what he'd really done was disturb a sleeping dragon. No. He felt certain, she was worse than Leland. His instructions via Moran had been simple. She got one chance. If that didn't work, they'd have to go for the final solution. It was his call. Just like with Leland and Wells.

What Styles didn't know was that she'd already squandered her chances, negated the alternative solutions Bentley had sought for her. Now it wasn't so much what he wanted as what she'd forced him to choose. Convincing himself she had to be taken care of more permanently, he reached for his phone and dialed Styles' number from memory.

MICHAEL MORAN TWEAKED his peppered mustache and answered his updated cell phone with a grin. The ring tune was *Bad man acallin'*. Looking into the instrument, he nodded. "Secure on my side, Boss."

"The Professor wants her taken care of, Michael. You know of my reluctance in this matter. But I need to make a decision. What have you got for me?"

Moran suppressed a sigh, tried to keep the edge out of his voice. "We got something from the recordings. Not much, but we think the nurse knows the location of the package and plans to meet with the doc tomorrow to make an exchange."

"Well then, here we go. It's what we've been waiting for haven't we? I presume the nurse is being taken care of as we speak?"

"Er-well . . . not quite, Boss—"

"Well then get on it, dammit. Without her, Conner is a pawn without a move. Haven't you figured that?"

"Our first thought, Boss. Only . . . well, there's . . . a small hitch."

"The hell with the euphemisms, Michael!"

"We can't find the nurse. I sent the boys in but the apartment was empty. I- we- figured she must've freaked after giving up the secret and skipped while they left her unwatched and tailed the doctor instead."

"What the FUCK, Michael. We watch her 24/7 for three months, and the moment we really want her, she's flown?"

"My bad. But we got the doctor, in our sights. All I need is your go and—"

"No, Michael. You screwed up big time. Fatal errors lead to fatal endings. Don't suggest another thing. Let me do the fucking thinking here."

Styles walked over to the window. He placed his palms against the chilled glass, overcome by the strangest of urges— to cry, to bawl his fucking heart out at how stupid his people were. In the blink of an eye he was back to where they were with Leland.

He had a bad feeling about doing the doctors. It just felt like overkill. And overkill's what fucked everything up. Yet, it had to be taken care of.

He returned to the desk.

"Listen up Michael. Listen good. Do this . . . but no locals, no trails— they're too close to the source. One doctor too many. Nobody gives a shit about these patient's who're dead anyway. But the doctors, I don't want your buffoons fouling up again. Get the Pro, you hear me? Now. Like yesterday. "

Moran stared out from the display. "Can't get him this fast, Boss. He's on assignment, right now, this afternoon, after the teenager. We gotta go through channels."

"Just . . . make . . . the . . . fucking . . . contact, Michael. Whatever it takes. You know the drill. Just get him to drop everything. The nurse has to surface for the exchange. Get the Pro to clean this up, understand?"

IT WAS LATE when Susan finally finished her workload and went looking for Jason, hoping to confide the bad news, get some advice. But, he was nowhere to be seen. Maureen said he hadn't come in for the day and couldn't be raised by phone, either. Returning to her office, Susan felt a splinter of fear, remembering now she hadn't seen him all afternoon.

All alone, she tried to figure her next move. Burdened with remorse, she wondered if Bentley would accept her apology, her pledge of professionalism in future. Or had she strayed too far beyond that window of hope to still slip through?

Then there was her motto: *If people did their duty, then bad things wouldn't happen.* Having always judged others by that, it was her turn to be judged. Going after the truth was her duty, perhaps her destiny. She had to resume Leland's quest.

So, did she go cap in hand to Bentley, or did she stay the course?

Her thoughts vacillated from submission to resistance, until she reached a decision: Tomorrow, she would get the key, find Leland's files, see for herself, before planning her course of action. All hope lay in tomorrow. If she could just make it through this night, tomorrow would take care of itself.

27

HE WAS A FORMER crack agent with the Feds. Had turned renegade after appropriating the spoils of a Colombian drug bust, during a DEA op he'd headed up in Miami. (There was a limit to how long one could work with all that money before succumbing to the lure of its power) The booty had presented the opportunity of a new life beyond the formal drudgery. Only, he'd have to step out of this life, enter a new one before he could live it. It had meant, of course, that he had to stage his own death— which he'd done with ease. He planted fake dental records in his dentist's system, corresponding to the John Doe he'd placed in a vehicle before blowing it up.

One problem though: he'd lost two fingers on his left hand after miscalculating the timing of the explosion and being too close. A small price. Then, using his experience at Quantico and on the field, he transformed his world. Lived the dream life, until the flush ran out a little too soon. He'd never anticipated the real needs of the high life. How could a sixty-thousand-dollar-a-year mid-level civil servant know anything about that? So he turned to the thing he'd become an expert at: Hunting humans. He picked his alias from a movie. Danny Roman. But that didn't matter. He didn't exist in the real world, anymore. He was death, he was a ghost.

What he saw in his mirror was no ghost, though. The flesh and blood were of a Caucasian, average looks: dark brown eyes in a square face, receding hairline, dark brown hair, fit, five-foot-ten. Unremarkable.

He'd set up an elaborate contact network through the Net for potential clients. Using a string of aliases and switching locations, including automated answering devices, he'd remained untraceable, even to many of his clients. All his payments came

into numbered offshore accounts. He had role models, precedents he'd studied during his erstwhile occupation, so it wasn't pioneering stuff. It wasn't unique. Which brought him to the next consideration:

Although the money had been good, the work was getting harder, the competition better. Roman had begun seriously contemplating a life in the Florida sunshine, when a big payday came in, roped him back to the job. What luck. It was unlike anything he'd done before, targeting sick, defenseless people, a kind of bulk order with a big fat retainer for picking off zombies.

Nothing was as simple as it seemed, though. He was beginning to become annoyed with the client. Could sense a change in rhythm, the kind that signaled panic. And panic made people careless. The client's damned priorities were changing at a rate that didn't suit his style, his passionate need for self-preservation.

But the customer was king. Which was why he was sitting at his desk in his Lower Westside apartment right now. Having rushed back after getting the call to abort, he was waiting for the online dossier to appear—in encrypted form, of course.

Earlier, he'd been about to do the girl, when his own contact called him urgently on his cell phone, said the client had changed the target.

Roman poured himself some bourbon, downed it in a single gulp and grimaced.

So he'd aborted the mission. Though he hated having to alter focus like that; hated having to step into a different beat in the middle of the music, he remembered the money. They'd pressed the pause button, stopped him for another job they wanted done right away: Two people, one hit. An impossibility—until they upped the reward.

When it played like this, he couldn't guarantee perfection. But he wouldn't tell them that. It was how the short order jobs worked out. Planning was the key to perfection. Without the full analysis of subject and location, the hours establishing a

routine; without the training runs, it was what he called, a street job—messy, spontaneous, fraught with the kind of shit he didn't really care for right now. He'd done a few in his time, but mostly he avoided that kind of work. It was the fine line that defined class from the riffraff in this occupation. It came with the territory, though. You couldn't always make appointments with death. Clients were people with special needs. Sloane-Wright was one of those. The thing to do was minimize the mess.

Presently, he heard the muted beeps signaling file transfer and decryption. Leaning back, he studied the pictures of his next targets: a doctor and a nurse.

28

Friday 22 November

MORNING BROUGHT A surprisingly clear calm day, warmer than the last. Perhaps her last day as a physician, she thought. By 2:30 this afternoon, she would be officially out of a job and without her medical career, unless there was something in Leland's stash that could exonerate her. Eileen had promised to give her the key at noon, during her break. Once at the hospital, though, she panicked when she called the ER and heard that Eileen hadn't come in. She had two hours after that to change her fate.

She called every ten minutes until, at around 9.45, an annoyed nursing supervisor called Eileen to the phone.

"Thank God, Eileen. I thought you got cold feet."

"Couldn't stay at my place last night. Not after what we talked about. See you in a couple of hours, Doc."

The wait was torture, but Susan opted not to go to the ER earlier than agreed. They were obviously being watched. During her duties, her movements were like a drone, without purpose. Bentley's overbearing voice was a hornet buzzing about her brain. She hardly paused, when sometime around eleven-thirty, a muted blast sounded in the distance, sucking the air from around her. Probably the sonic boom of a supersonic jet over the city, she thought, as metal dishes rattled against wood and glass tinkled in trays. Nothing surprised her about New York.

When she eventually headed to the ER, she was stunned. The frenetic order of the place had turned to chaos. There was talk of an explosion nearby. The wounded were being wheeled in. She was met by blood and agony at every turn.

No sign of Griffiths anywhere in the mayhem.

“Jesus Christ, not another one,” the frantic ER supervisor was saying. “I can’t deal with these bombs anymore.”

ER physicians rushed from one gurney to the next, issuing orders, doing exams, sorting victims according to priority, ordering X- Rays, bloods, calling codes. Every nurse was busy, tending to the injured or taking records. Even the orderlies were helping out with the nurses’ work. Caught up, she waded in to help, but the chaos felt controlled. Disaster Mode had kicked in and the tireless drills were proving effective.

Minutes later, she lifted her head, scanned the area for Eileen. Still, the nurse was nowhere to be seen. Feeling a tap on her shoulder she turned, saw a figure—masked, gloved, pale blue uniform— an orderly. Told her she was needed at Central Supplies, stat. Some emergency with Nurse Griffiths. Even though it was nearly impossible to tear her eyes from the tragic scenes in the ER, she moved off.

Navigating her way past the frenzy, she rushed down the corridor from the main ER to Central Supplies. Attagirl Eileen. This *was* an emergency.

The place was deserted in contrast with the rest of the ER, every spare space filled with a gurney, a wheelchair, a bloodied face. The bulk of personnel were obviously focused back in there now, and in the row of treatment rooms along the way.

The orderly appeared again, pointing to the open door to Narcotics. Susan looked hesitant. *Why was Eileen here of all places?* Surely the busy ER would raise the least suspicion if they were being watched. She just had to hand over a key, for God’s sake. As if he understood, the masked orderly shrugged, turned, moved away.

Susan frowned. The small room, filled with floor-to-ceiling shelves, boxes, reeked with the metallic odor of blood. “Eileen?” she called, suddenly wary. Something caught her eye in a darkened corner. She looked down, gasped at Eileen’s body,

spreadeagled on the floor, her limbs oddly twisted, her head in a pool of blood. Susan opened her mouth to scream just as she heard the door behind her click, a key turning in the lock. Her head was yanked up. A hand clamped her mouth shut.

Her lips were jammed against her teeth. Someone pressed up on her from behind. In her peripheral vision something gleamed—the gun that killed Eileen, she thought—and smelled a scent that was strong, distinctive.

Adrenaline surged through her body, its coppery taste in her mouth, causing her to bite down hard. Her elbow recoiled in a practiced maneuver, targeting the solar plexus just as she flung her head back and heard a crunch- the way she'd been taught.

The gun clattered to the floor.

“Hey what’s going on in there? Someone banged on the door behind her. “Open up this damned door,” yelled the nursing supervisor. “Open or I’m calling security!”

ROMAN HESITATED momentarily, suppressing a yell. *Fuck*. She was still biting his hand as he tried to figure how to get away without being seen.

After all the work setting up the explosion, creating the theater to play out his scene- this was going to be a do-over. *Fuck*. He was in agony as he banged her head against the wall and started for the gun.

As she slumped, he grabbed her at the scruff of the neck. He couldn’t let her fall, slip into unconsciousness for the same reason he wasn’t killing her. He’d expected to do them both with sufficient time to leave the hospital, be on his way by the time they were found. But now, they’d immediately begin a search for him

The banging and yelling again. Crazy this time. It was a case of survival from this point on. Nothing but instinct, now. The ghost had to disappear. He shoved the fallen gun into Susan’s right hand, and almost jumped as her fingers actually coiled

around the piece. She half turned to him, those green eyes meeting his own.

The bitch was still conscious. He watched her dazed eyes roll back into their sockets. Riffling shelves, he stuffed vials of narcotics into her coat pocket and turned the key. This way they won't search for a third presence and he'll walk out safely.

He hid behind the opening door, his right hand poised in a chopping stance. The backup piece was in his ankle holster, but he didn't think he'd need that.

Susan swayed as the nurse rushed in, the pear-shaped woman stunned by the scene, staring in shock and oblivious to the man slipping out from behind her.

Camouflaged by the orderly's uniform and the mask, gloves and cap, Roman walked away, cursing his bungle, as a loud scream rent the air.

29

HER EYES OPENED into white fog, silhouetted forms like ghosts in her field of vision.

Gradually, there appeared dark figures, flashes of light, someone in uniform taking photographs— NYPD in bold white letters.

A tall silhouette obscured the light, casting a merciful shadow over her. When he moved, bent low, squatted before her, she had to squint. His short-cropped hair was red. Gray-speckled copper stubble cast an orange tinge to his face. He had angry, curious eyes and a wide square jaw, like the Marlboro Man. He was close enough for her to see the fine mosaic of his skin, his wide pores, the warp and weft of his crumpled suit.

Grinning, he gestured to a uniform, and the odor of stale tobacco reached her just as she noticed his straight nicotine-stained teeth. A big man, beefy as a linebacker, he appeared to be in command.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, easy on the traffic, will ya. We’re tryin ta preserve a crime scene, for Chrissakes!”

She tried to sit up and noticed an ER intern hovering over her.

“Welcome back, Doc,” the big man said. He yelled the intern away from her. “Alright, cuff this one and let’s get her back to the precinct.”

THEY’D BEEN INTERROGATING her for hours, repeating their questions ad nauseam. Her memory of the morning’s events came and went. But the pain was relentless.

Sometimes she saw Eileen’s blood-matted hair, the neat, black-rimmed hole in her forehead, her tall slim body disappearing into a body bag. Sometimes she saw Amy ducking into her mother’s neck, shy of the stranger at her mother’s door. Mostly it was

confusing—Bentley among the curious ER personnel staring at her through the narrow Supplies doorway, the orderly, his cologne, same as the man who'd grabbed her from behind. All of it came and went—disjointed dispatches among the crackle and static of her mind. While the pain . . . it felt like her head would explode.

She studied the Marlboro Man. The one she'd seen conferring with Bentley as they escorted her in cuffs out of the hospital— before they'd brought her here to this room. A Spartan, abysmal place with a bolted-to-the-floor metal table and plastic chairs in a blaze of light. Windows barred by what looked like chicken mesh. The sign had said: Interview Room 2. She was upstairs, the first floor of the 17th Precinct. She vaguely remembered the signs, the walk up here . . .

It was a small police station— chaotic and busy, files in cardboard boxes, along passageways and spilling over cluttered desks, the paint peeling, the odor of cheap disinfectant and unwashed bodies, more piles of boxes, as though they'd just moved in and hadn't as yet had time to unpack. It was dilapidated, damp, musty. And her head throbbed, her wrists burned. Disbelief like nausea.

They'd removed the cuffs, but the welts remained, a child's red bangles.

"I'm Detective Sean O'Hara," Marlboro Man had said, those hours ago. "And this here's my partner, Detective Ferry."

It had been surreal, listening to their barrage of queries, half believing she'd done something wrong, half thinking this was just another scene in her failing delusional mind. As the clouds of bewilderment gradually dissipated, recollection improved. Now knowing the truth, Susan glared at them, trying to weigh their reality. Ferry, a brunette, was almost as tall as her partner, but small-shouldered, under the chintzy indigo blouse, Carly Simon face in a big head, which lolled when she nodded.

Her hard eyes held no sympathy.

"Why the hell did you bring me here?" Susan rasped. "Why the hell was I cuffed like a criminal?" She squinted under the toxic glare of the fluorescent cone.

"You killed the nurse. You're here to tell us the why and how."

"What? No. This is wrong. I'm not the one should be here. He tried to kill me, like he killed Eileen. She's got—she had— a little girl. Amy." She turned to the female detective. "She's just a toddler. Someone has to go out there . . ." She looked at O'Hara. "I'm not the one, I swear. Y-You should be out there trying to find *him*."

Susan flinched. Shrapnel raked through her skull, her ordeal in Supplies flashing through her mind. "Oh God."

O'Hara rubbed his stubbled chin, eyeing her. His gray-green eyes like tiny moss-laden pebbles studding the ruddy landscape of his face.

"Someone shot the nurse, *then* came after you?"

"Yes. He . . ." He was inside her head— so clear she could feel his presence. That hard body against hers, hands against her mouth. It was so vivid she could smell him, taste his breath . . . And there was something about his fingers, the way he gripped her, the bitter taste of the glove. "Yes, he was . . . he grabbed me and I saw his gun . . ."

"Someone you know?"

She shook her head, immediately regretting the move for the pain.

"Can you describe this person?"

"Sure. I- I . . . no . . . I'm sorry." All she could recall was an orderly— a uniform. Again, she recoiled from images, shut her eyes. "My head . . . Retrograde amnesia," she mumbled, trying to make sense of it.

"What?"

"My mind . . . it's not . . ." She rubbed her temples. "Please. I need a hospital. I need medication. I think I have concussion. Untreated, it can be really dangerous."

Ferry looked to O'Hara who gave a quick nod and she gestured at the one way glass. In minutes a uniformed policewoman brought coffee, aspirin.

O'Hara raised an eyebrow as Susan gobbled a handful of the pills. He turned his chair around, sat astride it and regarded her. "According to the nursing supervisor called out by the Supplies nurse—there were only two people in that room: The victim . . . and you kneeling before the body, the gun in your hand, muttering incoherently."

Susan shivered as she sipped the coffee. Her lips were blue, her cheeks bruised. She eyed the old box of aspirin. "I'm going to need something stronger."

"Sure. All you want. But first you've gotta give us something."

"I told you. She was dead already. Someone attacked me. I passed out . . ."

O'Hara sighed. His complexion was ruddier than ever.

"Look, Doc, you had the weapon in your hand, the narcotics in your pocket. We know about your meeting with the Hospital Board." He tapped a brown folder on the table. "Got this from your chief. Your problem's not unlike half the city, even your own kind. Substance abuse is common among doctors. Butter next to the fire. We see it all the time. So what you did, technically it wouldn't be your fault." He looked at Ferry.

"Diminished capacity," she said.

"Yeah. Whole different spin. Cooperate and this'll be a lot easier for you."

In the meantime Ferry had withdrawn beyond the bright cone of light. Audibly on her cell phone, she went on about Forensics, Medical Examiner, Slug and weapon a match. "What's that?" she said, "Prints are a match for the doctor's? That's enough prima facie evidence for an arrest. It's time for Miranda . . ." She came over, gave Susan a hopeless look. "Yeah, well, the evidence backs us up. We can make this one stick. Time to read the doctor her rights."

30

THE STATION HOUSE aspirin felt like it had lain in some grimy locker for a hundred years. Now it was in her belly, churning, churning, making her queasy. And there'd been no let up of her pain. They were about to arrest her and she'd be stuck here while the means of her innocence lay out there in Leland's locker. From a slow trembling, her hands were shaking uncontrollably now, her skin growing tighter. She was becoming claustrophobic. Her nausea intensified.

She had to find a way to get out of this place, she thought.

"Ohh," she cried and rose. Gasping, she faced Ferry, her hand flying to her mouth. "Quick! I need a bathroom. I think I'm going to be sick."

Ferry grimaced, spun her around and shoved her toward the door.

O'Hara summoned an escort— a uniformed Officer Baines who took Susan by the elbow and led her down a corridor, deeper into the building. The policewoman was a slender sweet-looking, ivory-complexioned woman who appeared more suited behind a cosmetics counter at Macy's than with the shapeless uniform and gun at her hip.

Entering the grimy stall of the toilets on the same floor as the interview room, Susan was immediately disappointed. Her plan in tatters. She knew they'd brought her only one floor up. It felt simplistic yet plausible there'd be a window she could escape through. Maybe they wouldn't bother with bars on the second floor, she thought. She'd pictured it, seen herself slip through, climb down a spout and leave this horrible place. That's how desperate she was.

Now she was staring at an industrial looking extractor fan removing the foul and pungent chemical fumes from the wholesale disinfectant, high overhead.

Susan slumped down on the seat, disappointed, and allowed herself to cry, her sobs growing louder with each second. The tears were genuine, but through them a plan emerged, inspired by the strong chemical smells rising from the toilet. She glanced hopefully at her shoes— the low-heeled pumps she'd always worn because Robert had been an inch shorter than her six-foot frame. They'd make a handy container.

Baines came to the stall. She began tapping on the door with her billy, "Hey, you done in there? C'mon, now. We gotta get moving."

Susan was ready. Her heart banged wildly. She sobbed even louder.

Baines stopped rapping. "You wanna gimme a break with that racket. Don't do the crime if you can't do the time, honey. You know the drill. C'mon now." Then the policewoman yelled as the stall door opened and foul liquid splashed into her face.

Susan dropped her wet shoe and lurched forward. Baines dropped her billy, staggered back, clutching at her eyes with both hands. Swearing, she flailed, started to yell and reached for her gun. Susan grabbed the billy and swung it with such force, it met the side of Baines' head with a crunch and sent the policewoman sprawling.

Susan regarded her handiwork with tears welling in her eyes. Then she latched the main door, exchanged her own clothing for Baines' uniform. The kit was dreadfully heavy, the belt burdened with a million gadgets— gun, handcuffs, ticket book, flashlight . . . She kept only the gun and cuffs, all the while fumbling, sobbing, battling to focus.

Baines' shoes wouldn't do. They were several sizes too small. The uniform pulled at the crotch, the armpits. In the mirror, she looked silly enough to be caught out, but only if someone was really looking.

Before leaving, she checked Baines' pulse, eased her onto her side and tilted the woman's head to keep a clear airway. Palpating Baines' head, she realized she'd given the woman a skull fracture at the least.

It was a harrowing few minutes. Out into the corridor, the landing, down the stairs, past the sergeant's inundated booking desk, and out into the cool late afternoon. Freedom like a salve against her terror.

Several blocks down, she felt the rush of exhilaration. It washed over her like a wave of hysteria, causing her to laugh uncontrollably. Pulling into an alley, she ducked into shadows and let the laughter spew out. Her stomach hurt from the effort, until she doubled up, then slid into a squatting position, the laughter slowly ending in a racking outpouring of tears. After several moments, she stood and smacked herself sharply, her face smarting. Breathing as evenly as she could, she kept repeating the need to be calm, to be logical, to maintain constant motion.

She took alleys wherever she could, keeping to any shadow the late afternoon provided. The uniform might be both hindrance and help, she realized, with trepidation. Every time she spotted police, she didn't know how to react. There were nuances of exchange between people of the same profession, she couldn't know about, couldn't figure so soon. Susan feared that a strange move, something odd, could blow her cover. Especially since an alert would've surely gone out by now.

As she fled northwards, without thinking, without knowing, dusk receded into night. The loud city became louder, busier, more impersonal. And she was dog-tired, famished, and shivered as evaporating perspiration rapidly chilled her body.

When she glanced at her watch again, it was nearly 6:30 P.M.

Her mind was clear now, and she knew, the blow to her head, the amnesia, her craving had all merged to screw up the chronology of her mind, bringing her most desperate desire to the fore. She'd imagined Nate alive, close by. O God, she held a hand to her mouth and willed the memory away.

What now, she wondered. With the key lost, what do I do?

She felt alone, hopeless when it dawned that Riverview Mews would be the first port of call for anyone seeking her. Like the waning dusk, her world was so rapidly disappearing . . .

Then she remembered something.

Lint in a flash of light.

And it was gone.

But it precipitated the most audacious decision.

Looking around quickly, she found she was somewhere on 60th Street, near Bloomingdale's— So far from where she needed to be right now.

So far from her last hope.

31

NIGHT AIR CUT her skin, bit into her nostrils, chilled her to the bone.

Baines' uniform was no barrier against the cold. Every muscle in her body hurt with a familiar ache. Her throat grew parched and raw. She shook uncontrollably now as her craving deepened. She needed something—anything. *Oh God please*, she begged looking around for a place where she could score a fix. Even if there was, how could she pay? Hugging herself, she stopped for a while, turned away from the street to the warmth of shop displays. Just a moment's respite before she took up again.

In the windows of Bloomingdale's, fall was out, winter collections in, ski pants and tops in the clear wintry skies of Aspen, faux fur and leather too, under the first sprigs of holly— just letting her mind wander for the briefest time to festive scenes. Until she caught the reflection of the police cruiser easing into a no-parking zone behind her.

Panic tugged, but she remained still, continued watching, hoping they weren't here for her. Ten seconds . . . twenty . . . half a minute. She couldn't tell if they were looking her way or not, the faces invisible in the internal darkness of the car. She didn't turn to find out. Instead, her face averted, she made for the corner of 60th and Lexington.

There was a subway station here. Green spheres. The station would be manned, thank God. Taking the train would save her an exhausting walk.

Underground was quiet. No crowds, no cover, she fretted. Looking at the kiosk, she wondered about a pass, then remembered, cops never pay to get on the subway. She headed past turnstiles for the southbound tracks, hoping there'd be a train soon.

Ten minutes in the shadows, avoiding the obvious off-hour waiting area before she heard the whine and rumble of the approaching train. At the last minute, she moved

out furtively, looking this way and that. Passengers alighted, others began getting in. She spotted two Transit Authority policemen staring at her. It was a serendipitous thing for them. A case of checking out the woman in the tight uniform. Then the mental registering of the alerts that might've just been dispatched to them.

They were maybe twenty yards away, yet she saw everything— the nudge of elbows, the one's head tilting toward the radio mike, his eyes still on her. The other, also staring, hands hooked into his belt, nodded a greeting— a kind of “Hey, *compadre*.” Their eyes darting from her to the open train doors, they moved toward her, trying to be oh so casual. Yet their slanted shoulders— gun hand rising, ready— was almost amusing if she wasn't so transfixed, so depleted. Beat cops about to become heroes.

Startled by the hydraulic sounds as the train gunned into motion, she turned and spurted for the exit. Up on the street, the cruiser from earlier had been parked near the Third Avenue side. She took the opposite route toward Lexington Avenue, not letting up until she'd been swallowed by the Friday evening crowds.

It troubled her how easily she'd been recognized. She thought of a disguise. And smiled. Thinking how ridding herself of one disguise would make for a better one. So she discarded her glasses, which were fake anyway, got rid of the ponytail and let her hair cascade down from under the cap, fall in layers to her shoulders.

A block from the hospital, she took a deep breath and entered the Rite Aid store. Without money, she hoped the uniform would help. With a story of her partner injured nearby, she got a small pack of Motrin and water on the house. She downed half the pack before she was out the store, battling to keep the rest for later.

In the aftermath scene of the day's early horror, a small contingent of police, FBI and Homeland Security personnel still milled about at the explosion site, a block north of the hospital, near the Rivergate Ice Rink. Stenciled FBI letters stood out in the

night, and bright police tape cordoned off evidence that would speak of a twisted mind. Slipping back into an unlit corner, Susan studied the scene for moments, then to be safe, took Second Avenue and came round to the Medical Center from the 30th Street side.

As always police presence was a feature of the ER. Friday night the zone had the electric buzz of tragedy and heroism. This night was no different. No one cared if you moved around with confidence. And she knew the place well. Lowering the brim of her cap, she approached elevators. The pills were working. She felt better, confident.

Virology appeared deserted, except for a lean evening crew that dealt with the police presence with indifference. It had been a day of dark blue.

Only when she got to her locked office in which her money, her means of survival lay, did Susan realize her keys were in her scrub pants pocket at the police station. For nerve-racking moments she paced the corridor before spotting hope in the form of an after-hours cleaner, a bunch of keys jangling like treasure from the woman's hip. Once inside she grabbed her stash of meds and touched the lump in her head. It was going to be a long night. Quickly filling a syringe with the morphine cocktail— the last bit she had— she jabbed the needle into her arm and slowly slumped into her chair.

It was past eight when she looked at her watch again.

She took out her billfold, her cell phone and the keys to her Yamaha (even though she knew it would be a mistake to even consider using it) she set out for the ER.

Baines' uniform continued to be the ticket. At Central Supplies, she merely gestured at the duty nurse, who obliged by opening the door.

Inside Narcotics, images of Eileen flashed back— her twisted limbs, the shock fixed forever in those lifeless eyes, her head in the red puddle. Susan fought a spell of dizziness, aware how little time she had here, how vital it was that she concentrate.

Eileen said she kept Leland's key at the hospital in something close to her heart,

something that reminded her of Leland. It was the last gift he'd given her. Two weeks before his death, he'd taken her to *Julia Loon's*, given her this tiny teddy bear key chain. Earlier, Susan had seen it— almost subliminally. Tricked by the orderly Eileen must've come here, expecting to see Susan but met death, instead. The key chain had lain on the lowest shelf. It was the last thing Susan had seen before passing out. Perhaps it had fallen when Eileen was attacked, perhaps she'd surreptitiously thrown it there when confronted.

And while Crime Scene techs would comb the scene thoroughly, they could never close off Supplies indefinitely or take away every item that was stored here.

Kneeling, she tilted her head and scanned the lowest shelf, her pulse pounding in her ears. And there it was, a tiny novelty item that was perhaps the key to her salvation.

Feeling the hardness within the stuffing, she undid the Velcro strip in back, slipped her finger through the tiny opening and breathed a sigh. The key was there.

Before leaving she clutched some ampoules and shoved them into her pockets. All she had to do now was make it out the front door and get to Grand Central Station.

Buoyed by the find, she casually headed down the corridor past treatment rooms, toward the main section of the ER.

A couple of nurses were headed in the opposite direction. Recognizing one of them Susan smiled. The familiar young woman returned the smile as she passed by.

Susan was looking straight ahead, concentrating on the path to the exit, bracing herself for the tense passage through the busy place— past the police officers and the exit guard- when she heard her name being called. It took her only a split second to realize the folly of what she'd just done.

32

SUSAN DIDN'T RESPOND to her name. That would mean certain capture and an end to all hope. So she kept moving—her head in shadow under Baines' cap—down the unending corridor, past the guard at the exit and out into a blast of shockingly cold air.

Behind her a commotion brewed. Any moment it would erupt. Ambitious policemen would burst through, come storming after her. But she could not look back, could not slow down, constant motion her only salvation. And yet—there was no place to go. Directly in her path were FBI and NYPD personnel at the explosion site.

Susan whirled around, avoided north where the uniforms milled behind crime scene tape, and fled the other way down First Avenue.

For a couple of blocks she walked briskly trying not to attract attention. Then she broke into a run for several blocks more. Raking empty reserves, her lungs burned, tears bounced off her cheeks. Susan shrunk before her surroundings: the unfamiliar streets, unnavigable alleys and unfathomable crowds of her adopted city— all posing a terror of unknowns she could never hope to survive. She was just an Ivy League female injured and abandoned in the dark-canyoned maze of an impersonal metropolis.

She slowed, glanced over her shoulders then took up again, disbelief compounding her fear. The madness consumed her, pushed her on the fringe of hysteria. Clenching her teeth, her fingers biting inside her balled fists, she whimpered. *Oh God, what have I done? I'm a target for killers, a fugitive from the law. What am I doing out here, in this wilderness of insanity?* The answer came as she reached into her pocket and clutched the teddy bear.

Grand Central was close. To be safe she decided on a roundabout route.

As minutes ticked by, the adrenaline rush ebbed, hunger bit and the drug demon arose. She gasped from pangs of craving, upset the Morphine had already waned. Her body's tolerance demanded increasing doses just to keep her on an even keel.

Exhaustion rapidly overtook her now. Somewhere in the uncertain maze, she felt herself slipping, the sidewalk a rising blur in her eyes. Her muscles cramped from a profusion of chemical waste within cells. She hadn't eaten this day, the morning coffee her only nourishment. It was a miracle she didn't collapse— her subconscious resolve not to quit, not to fail, sustaining her. But it was no more than a shred now, a tattered will leaving her sprawled on the sidewalk.

Somewhere in the madness she remembered the uniform and lifted herself to her feet. Her next thoughts were of shelter, rest. A hotel for the night, a change of clothes, food, medicine—these were her immediate needs. For that she needed money. Her purse's yield was a few hundred dollars, which wasn't much, but should be sufficient for clothes and a place to see the night through. Plastic could take care of the rest.

She moved slower, distance from her epicenter of trauma granting small increments of confidence. After searching for a while, she found an army surplus and second-hand store. Ten minutes later, she walked out of the place munching an energy bar, dressed in baggy denim jeans, an oversized navy blue sweater, a pair of almost new Nike sneakers and a Yankees baseball cap. A military green canvas backpack, secure at her shoulders, held Baines' gun like a dreaded but dependable charm.

In the change-room she'd discovered her cell phone missing— it must've fallen out somewhere. For the best, perhaps. Or the police could have used its GPS to trace her. Outside, she dropped Baines' uniform in the trash, started up on her second cookies-and-cream flavored bar and tried to figure the route to Grand Central.

The key had to be used immediately. She couldn't bank on there being a

tomorrow. Her pursuers would've surely staked out the familiar places, hoping her homing instincts would override all reason and bring her to them. So, she had to do the exact opposite. Apropos that, she pulled her cap low and hailed a cab out on the street.

It was a short ride and a worthwhile risk, she thought through her fatigue.

At Grand Central she immediately blended into the throng, continuously picking out a partner or more from the crowds. Her instinct for survival evolving rapidly.

So far so good. Hair tucked inside the baseball cap, her body hidden beneath the formless jeans and sweater, she experienced a curious freedom in the anonymity of the great place. Thank God, she'd been here already, the familiarity breeding confidence.

From the bustling Main Concourse to the Lower Level. Approaching the Lost and Found room, she felt the involuntary trembling begin. The presence of the police station right next door, and mental flashes of that face she'd kept seeing the previous day, caused her heart to wildly bound— a runaway carriage on the track of her anxiety.

THE LOST AND FOUND/Parcel Room was a quiet, eerie place manned by a wiry old timer with short receding spiky hair and gaunt cheeks. He was seated behind a wooden counter, reading a much-battered Stephen King novel. *Carrie*. He was starting right at the beginning, she thought, or perhaps this was his second or third time round the King repertoire. It reminded her of college, the late nights, girls scaring themselves to death as they read aloud the stark, entrails-hanging-out passages from the master of horror. She'd read somewhere that Stephen King and his dear wife Tabitha could barely make the rent on their apartment when his agent had called to tell him the advance on his first book, *Carrie*, would be four thousand dollars. In current terms, probably a hundred times that much. And that, for fiction. She wondered what the going rate might be for the true-life horror of her last twenty-four hours, as she pulled the key from her jeans

and leaned on the counter, hands shaking from fatigue and her dark cravings.

The old timer folded the corner of his page, set the book, print side down and looked up reluctantly, arching eyebrows,

“Help you, Ma’am?”

Susan flinched, one hand rushing up to her mouth as she turned away a split second too late. Old Timer had one good eye that stared right through her, while the other, a marble one in its ruined orbit, sagged— a wet sock on the clothesline. He was chewing gum, his mouth half open, so that she could glimpse his carious elongated lower incisors. She bit her lip at her indiscretion, quickly averted her gaze and began checking out the place. On one wall of the room was a grid of numbered pigeon holes and baskets. On the other were lockers, a wall full of them.

She breathed deeply. Is this where Leland had come during his worst days? And if so, which one of those squares contained the key to her salvation?

“So, you wanna or not, Lady?”

“Huh? Oh.” Susan released her grip on the key, then watched the attendant hold it up, study it without recognition.

Please, please, let this be the place.

She barely contained her quivering. They could’ve picked up her trail by now. Someone could be right behind her watching, waiting.

Old Timer pulled a pack of gum from under the counter, unwrapped it, carefully folded the stick and placed it on his tongue, like an old cowboy packing snuff in the side of his jaw. Next, he checked the key number against entries in a register. Then looked up, the glass eye lolling, the good one fixed on her as his head shook from side to side.

The knot in her stomach tightened. *Oh Lord, no.*

If the files were not here, then—

Wait. What was he saying? The amount owing . . . three-fifty a day, a hundred-and-nine days . . . three-hundred-eighty-one dollars, fifty cents, the Stephen King fan explained. "This ain't long term storage ya know? Better off pickin' Mailbox America or one a them other outfits."

Leland had obviously not expected the files to be here this long. It was a small price to pay for her life back, though. Shrugging, she slipped the Amex card across the counter, opting to keep the cash for emergencies. Old Timer went to a row of lockers, opened one with her key and brought a fat brown roll to the counter. He marked off his register then fumbled with the card in the machine. Once, twice, cussing . . .

C'mon, she mentally urged, suddenly afraid, shuddering at the sense of phantom fingers at her neck. She started to perspire. Good God, this was taking forever.

He got it right third time. Handed her the slip to sign.

When it was over, reaching for her things, she sensed more and stiffened as if bracing for impact. Old Timer was looking up, past her, his good eye registering the presence of another soul in the room and she felt a frozen blade edging down her spine.

But it was nothing more than her frazzled mind which was churning the ordinary into melodrama. In truth, as long as she carried Leland's stash, she remained on the verge of hysteria. Shoving Leland's files into her knapsack, she averted her gaze from the police station next door and took the nearest exit from the building.

On East 42nd Street, she hurried west, her eyes frequently probing pools of darkness behind. There were no illusions now. She'd passed the point of no return. Sure, the police were combing the streets for her, but she was more afraid of something else. She'd been touched by the hand of a killer, the murderer of Eileen, perhaps Leland, and the patients, too. It was only a matter of time before he found her. That looming inevitability was torture as she moved alone, afraid, deeper into the kind of world she'd

never have envisioned, even in her bleakest of days.

Cold breezes rising from the dispassionate streets, nuzzled up to her sweat-damp neck, rose to her ears, whispered words of urgency:

They're closing in like the darkest hour of the night, Susan. Find a place to hide. Find food and shelter. Find the truth. Move, Susan, move.

Conscious thought receded to a quiet corner of her mind as she rushed through the night. She had no idea of her destination, but felt drawn to her path, lured by some definite, yet inexplicable purpose. Block after block, down streets of recent acquaintance, she walked . . . until it came to her. The previous day en route to the library, she'd seen a place. It's where she was headed now. Down Fifth Avenue and past the library, she moved, hurrying east into 40th Street . . . where she found it, the place with the peculiar name that had remained in her mind.

The building was tall, yet dwarfed by neighboring skyscrapers, long since grown to find the sun. Under the light of signs, it appeared old, grayish, water stains on stucco, colored in sepia and mid-brown by mildew— the art of time. Though in need of repair, it carried the quaint charm of place and time with dignity. Best of all, it didn't look expensive. A place for the harried, weary traveler, she thought: *The Journey's End*.

A portent, perhaps, the little voice in her head said, but she ignored it. This could certainly be a good omen. Maybe this would be the end of her journey all right— when all would be taken care of right here, tonight, as soon as she explored Leland's files.

She felt for the backpack, the weight of its contents reassuring. What lay there could herald the end of this nightmarish journey for her.

Requesting a single room, she paid with Amex, refused the offer of a porter and fled the public area for her room on the fifth floor.

33

STYLES WORE A silver gray evening jacket, gray shirt, darker gray cravat- tone on tone- as he sat alone in his living room this night. Not even the high end consort from Manhattan Blue, could hold his attention. Naked in the Jacuzzi downstairs, she lapped up a rock concert on the high def 100-inch 3D LCD display- a part of the four-hundred-thousand dollar home theater system he'd recently had installed in the mansion.

Restless, he rose and headed for his den. Closing the huge mahogany door behind him, he locked it. From a leather-bound humidor, he selected a Cuban cigar, delicately unwrapped it, brought it to his nose and sniffed with eyes closed. Then set it down again before stepping into the center of the room where he stood unmoving, savoring the tranquility of the moment. A sweet reprieve, he thought, in a day he'd come to loathe. All afternoon his cellphone had been relentless— Moran keeping him constantly abreast of developments on the Dr Conner front.

By now his rage had abated some, but its residue kept him moody, needing the rhythm and familiarity of old habits. Setting his feet apart in a stance, he slowly began taking swipes at imaginary foes in the air, muttering to himself in the muted light.

The ritual therapy begun, he slipped into his old mold where he was most at ease. He threw a combination: left jab, left jab, right hook, uppercut—vestiges of his youth as a boxer in the Bronx. Styles recalled a time when he used to be one of the famous regulars at Sullivan's Gym, before the new order overrode the borough- the ethnic diaspora, the projects, grand designs of ruin- things that had annihilated his early history, but not him.

Styles threw another combination— Left jab, left jab, right hook, uppercut,

Melnick, Leland, Wells, Conner—and winced. He felt a twitching at his cheek under the missing eye and opened his mouth wide to stretch and ease the muscle. After all these years, he still suffered pain in the orbit. Sometimes he even felt the phantom itch and reached up to rub the missing eye. It was crazy. He suffered the ghosts of crimes past both mentally and physically. Ghosts that haunted his nightly dreams to this day. His arms fell to his sides, the fists balling up as he stared . . . into his own past . . . at the midget in the Bronx whom fate had dealt a cruel blow.

Throughout his youth he'd hated himself. Loathed the image of the stout, barrel bodied, large-headed midget weirdo— now with only a single eye and a deformed socket— he saw in the mirror every day. Why had God done something like this? Why would he possess a normal mind— like anyone else— if his body were that of a freak? It was the ultimate in cruelty. A normal mind would reject an abnormal body. *Was it a mistake committed by God?* It had to be. According to his mother and the Catholic sisters in his junior elementary school, God was Perfect, Pure, Benevolent. So it had to be a mistake. And if Perfect God had made a mistake, then . . .

The conundrum was hard to bear. The young Styles loved God dearly but had come to doubt His perfection, His power and, after a while, His existence. So in one of his more dour moments, he decided to abandon his Lord, realizing the fallacy of faith in an imperfect God. It was the turning point for him. He knew that human beings made their own destiny. And from the way the other kids humiliated him, he figured human beings could play God if they had the power over others. The realization was the seed of his dream of someday becoming the most powerful man in the world.

But like most mortals Styles' incertitude made his rejection of faith a tentative, conditional, love-hate relationship: *You've made me a freak, so You owe me. If You bestow upon me Your favor, if You help me I will believe. If You don't, I won't. Your*

help will prove Your existence, Your power will prove Your worth for worship.

During the years he'd abandoned faith, it had taken hard work, determination and the right crimes along the way, to bring him this far up the rungs of Sloane-Wright Biotech. And when he'd finally become a millionaire, his loneliness and fear of losing it all brought him back into the fold: *I will believe, I will serve, if You stay by my side.*

"I will," he whispered and plopped down in a chair, his mind abruptly back in the thick of his worries. The Pro's mess-up could cost them if the doctor wasn't roped in soon. He hated that she'd proved far tougher than he'd thought—if only to have to bear with Moran's "I told you so," tone. It was good to know that Moran's judgment could be trusted, though. If only he'd listened to his man earlier, when Bentley had first complained about the renegade doctor . . .

"But, no matter," he whispered as he kissed the crucifix pendant hanging from his neck, "It'll all fall into place eventually."

Now that he'd promised a substantial reward for the first of his men who traced the errant doctor and an even bigger bonus for the one who silenced her for good, it was only a matter of time, wasn't it?

34

THERE WAS NO Room Service at *The Journey's End*. En route to room 507, she got vending machine sodas and Hershey Bars. It was a small, functional space: some sanguine artist's attempt in its oil pastel colors— the bright rust and tropical green drapes, matching bed linen, terra cotta walls, stained wood, color-coded paintings, worktables, television . . .

A glance at the backpack and she shook her head. Her life was dissolving and she looked to a dead man's secret for resurrection. *What if she found nothing there?*

A rising pulse, a claw at her throat, triggered a need she assuaged with a handful of pills. Not the syringe, she thought. For now she needed her faculties primed. In the bathroom mirror, she stared at herself. Her skin was pale and translucent in her languid face. Her hair matted, greasy, her sunken eyes were shocking. Dead rosebuds in their darkening calyces.

She stood transfixed by the stranger. Even without the glasses, the nerdy look, she couldn't shed the melancholy that lent its blue hue to the green of her irises. Blue, just like the bruises caused by the killer's grip, his fingers ghosted on either side of her chin. Nothing familiar here, she thought, her eyes filming over as she turned away and headed for the backpack, praying she'd find a second chance in there.

Inside the fat, first and second envelopes were Xeroxed copies of patient files, three or four pages long, separated by paper clips. Attached to the first stack was a hospital prescription sheet with a list of handwritten initials and codes going all the way down the A4 page— fifteen to twenty entries. On the second manila envelope, Leland had written: *Lab Reports To Follow*.

Her heart sank. What good would any of this be without the lab reports?

A third, smaller envelope was addressed to *Special Agent Brent Fielding, FBI*, followed by cell- and landline phone numbers with the New York area code. It contained a flash memory stick. A prison-garb-orange Post It note pasted on the inside of the envelope read (in Leland's hand, she presumed):

ATT: SPECIAL AGENT FIELDING

CONFIDENTIAL info on Flash

FOR PRESIDENT'S EYES ONLY.

That required a computer, she thought, pushing the flash aside and reaching for the thick stack first. Then, biting into a chocolate bar, she turned the first page.

BY MIDNIGHT and midway through her second reading Susan flung aside the files, despondent and angry. Her eyes were red, puffy and she battled to concentrate as the documents, page after page, yielded nothing of value so far.

The first time round, her brain had been sluggish. Her eyes became tired, made Leland's scribbled entries rise and float above the page. It was a pain. Stops, starts, initials, abbreviations, asterisks, codes— a weird shorthand she struggled to decipher. Leland's slashes, strokes, rushed letters, haphazard entries and lack of punctuation, created the mental graphic of a terrified man, who'd obviously never expected to be absent during the study of these files, such was his haste, his omission of detail.

Suppressing yawns, she kept on for another hour until Leland's words blended into mush and her brain quit. She sighed, disappointed that no heinous pattern of conspiracy had jumped off the pages as she expected. The reading had been uneventful, monotonous, while a dull fog hovered over her brain like noxious chemical smog.

It had to be the concussion, she thought. By now the sizeable bump on her head

had grown tender and begun to wildly throb. She injected herself with the morphine cocktail and sat back while the smog rose and dissipated.

After a while she undressed, stepped into the tiny shower and braced herself before turning on the cold water. She yelped as the first icy needles struck her skin.

For two minutes she endured the torture. Then turned on the hot water and eased into its luxury. Taking her time, she allowed her mind to clear. As morphine seeped into cells, she felt her neural pathways replenish their chemical supplies, rediscover their sequences and turn her mental entropy into some kind of order.

Later, wrapped in towels and a blanket, she took up the files again.

And by 2:00 A.M., tired, sleepy, as if in a dream, the images came to her . . . small increments, unraveling the layers of woe . . .

A VIRUS THAT had become humankind's nemesis for three decades, decimating millions, and threatening billions more, could finally be destroyed by a single therapy called SW500. And if what she'd seen in the CRU, heard first hand from survivors and read in these files were true, a way had been found to save humankind.

According to Leland's entries, though, things began unraveling from around the tenth month of treatment. Certain patients started to relapse, their CD4 cells consistently declining in numbers, the decline in inverse proportion to actual viral titers.

Susan shuddered. No matter how often she imagined the scenario, it left her awed by the calm cruelty of nature. She winced at the flashing mental images she'd studied in such gruesome detail, the reality of HIV's havoc and carnage she witnessed every day. And she felt a poignant sadness for all those in the trials who'd glimpsed the miracle, only to flounder in the darkness once again.

Leland hadn't expanded on reasons for the relapse. It had become clear from his

notes, however, that months before the expression of clinical symptoms, the microscopic picture had emerged in the blood and tissue samples.

Using these early signs, a 'bad-apple' list had been compiled of the affected patients. And when it emerged that this number would be high enough to cause the FDA to halt the project, the list had been converted into a hit list—the sheet of paper clipped to the top of the first stack.

But, what could they hope to accomplish by killing patients?

She reminded herself what she'd already surmised. That Leland had obviously compiled his 'evidence' in a hurry, expecting to be present for any inquiry. This was the only reason she could think to explain his omission of full names. He'd used only initials next to the codes for the affected patients.

Among the files were a few numbered quite differently: PX1, PX2, PX3 (with their initials scribbled in pencil), and so on. Leland had labeled these PRIVATE. Meaning they were influential enough to circumvent the lottery process of selection.

In the hit list, only one of these, PX3, appeared. Next to it, Leland had penciled in several asterisks. The initials of the participant that appeared just before X3 was L.O.N. Before this was T.J. whom Susan guessed was Tyrone Jackson. She referred to the file for L.O.N. and, from the age of the subject, guessed that this was Laura, her young friend. She went back to the file for PX3, age forty-seven. Coupled with this file, marked with the many asterisks, were the letters P-WH, ringed and followed by exclamation marks. Beside this Leland had scribbled: "White House—check/confirm Bentley DC schedule."

So this was Leland's explosive secret. The White House link. Susan sighed. This wasn't what she expected. Or, perversely, what she wanted. The revelation proved an anticlimax. So what if some White House staffer or big-wig was a private participant in

the SW500 trials. If Leland had died for these files, she expected it to reveal something really major, like government corruption regarding the trials, or a cover-up, or some illegitimate deal to get SW500 fasttracked through the FDA—something scandalous enough to rock the nation or destroy Sloane-Wright. It had to go right to the top.

Did Leland know more than he'd revealed here?

Letting the idea develop, she turned her attention to others on the hit list. She speculated that the patients to be killed would've been selected by virtue of their early tissue indicators, which explained why the clinical picture of some patients like Tyrone and Laura had only recently emerged. With chilling detail, she recalled the entries in both their files. Generalized symptoms she now knew were specific for a relapse. Only the lab reports could confirm her speculation, though.

So, slowly but surely SW500 was failing, earlier in some patients, later in others. And Sloane-Wright would be judged on those that were doing fine. As the bad apples perished in "accidents" the results became increasingly perfect.

She wondered what the current list, presumably with Bentley, might look like and how many new victims had been added. The trials were to end in a few months. All they had to do was get there without any setbacks and Sloane-Wright would be home free. Of course, if the final results included the findings for these participants (and there should be many more cases of relapse before the trials end), there'd be investigations, delays, possibly a halting of the project by the FDA. Moves that could cost the company hundreds of millions of dollars. Perhaps, far more.

She could understand why the risks were minimal and acceptable for Sloane-Wright. Based on initial results, and the subsequent behind-the-scenes deals, SW500 could easily rake in billions of dollars in advance orders. That, in itself, justified the heinous means employed by the company. They'd have the resources after that to

improve their product if, indeed, it could be done. Add to that the problems with AsthEze, the loss of revenue. It all added up.

She walked to the window. This was fate, she thought. Here she was, taking up the cudgels for innocent strangers, when her own father had possibly died in a similar way, from an anti-inflammatory drug for his arthritis. The drug, rumored to be the cause of heart attacks had been implicated. But a direct cause had never been proven. The international company had subsequently withdrawn the drug without explanation.

Achy, exhausted, she rubbed her eyes and yawned as she looked out of the small window. Across the street were taller skyscrapers, and down below, on either side of her window, the fat veins of traffic.

Her eyes grew somber at the distant unceasing current of lights. This great metropolis, despite its monumental neon signs, garish illumination, its bright culture, and enlightenment, was in so many ways still a dark city to her. Unfamiliar, untamed, and unwelcoming, it had brought her nothing but loneliness and misery. And now, with the disintegration of her dream, it loomed with tragedy.

With a shudder, she closed the drapes, turned her back to it, headed for the bed. It was almost 3:00 A.M. She sat on the bed with a sigh. How desperately, she'd expected Leland's files to make some blatant sensational revelation, something easily interpreted by anyone other than him or someone on the team. The least he could've done was get hold of the lab reports, so that these files could really be her salvation.

Propping pillows, she leaned back against the headboard and wondered if things were as serious as she was making them out to be. Serious enough to initiate a probe if she went to the health authorities? And if so how could she achieve that while she remained a fugitive? And the Flash drive . . . maybe the lab results were there including all the details to solve her problem. According to Eileen, it had become impossible to

continue Xeroxing files. Which meant Leland had copied everything onto the Flash, rendering the hard copies redundant. And so . . . she had everything she needed.

For the President's Eyes Only.

She pondered this. Why had Leland directed something like that to the president if the White House was involved? Was there something more, something going on that was unknown to the president? A computer would answer those questions.

On impulse she called reception about using a computer. "The Business and Internet Access Center would only be available during business hours," came the reply. "However, all rooms were Wi Fi hotspots if she had a notebook computer."

Anyway, Leland's quest had been essentially flawed, she thought. It was inconceivable that anyone in the chain of command—police, FBI, Secret Service—would submit the disc to the president without prior scrutiny—especially in the post 9/11 era.

The throbbing in her head returned. She downed more meds. Filling a syringe, she kept it for later. Time to quit, she decided, time to end the second worst day of her life. She got into bed, switched on the TV to CNN and absently watched a brief report on the global food shortage riots. Then she saw a man with oriental features, a bouffant hairstyle and dark, thick-rimmed glasses delivering a speech. His tone was belligerent, the subtitles interpreting talk of war. She recognized Kim Jong Il, the North Korean leader. In recent months, since his country's resumption of its nuclear program, a series of US spy drones had been shot down over North Korea, precipitating war rhetoric against the South Koreans and their allies. Friendly cooperation agreements between North and South were broken as Northern military personnel amassed on the DMZ.

The scene changed to the White House. Cameras panned over the white columns of the South Portico, lush green lawns, to President Valerie Madison stepping off Marine One, having returned from somewhere by helicopter. The camera zoomed in on

the First Face, the sculpted regal features, her soft, contemplative eyes.

Susan smiled at her first positive feelings for the day. She'd always admired the president's genuine compassion for the people. Standing on the White House lawn, the slim figure was as impeccable in her dark pantsuit and short blond hair. But there was something else. The camera had zoomed too close, revealing shadows around the eyes that some make-up person hadn't had the time to hide— a barely perceptible weariness about the president's expression and walk, a faint sagging of the shoulders.

Good God. A thought occurred to Susan. She gasped. But there it was, making her sit bolt upright, causing sleep to leave her body. Even the president's human, subject to exhaustion. *That's all.* It shouldn't be grounds to think anything else.

Responding to a journalist's question the president said, "Yes, I've pushed for dialogue from the outset. I've extended the hand of friendship to all peace-loving people of the world. But, when illegitimate governments and radical groups, bent on destabilizing civilization, speak with that kind of arrogance . . . *that* level of disrespect for international laws and the moral codes of human brotherhood . . . despite our sincerest efforts at peace, well, then they're asking a question: Do you have the guts to stop us?" The president paused then said, "And I say we have to answer that question."

"And are you going to answer that question with war, Madam President?"

A smile returned to the contemplative eyes, but the jaw remained resolute.

"No, John, I'm going to answer with something even stronger . . . words."

Susan swallowed. Her heart was pounding as it dawned that Leland's treasure had given her the sensational after all.

Not that it was something she even remotely desired to be true.

35

Larry Myers, White House Chief of Staff, Washington, D.C.

WORDS OF WAR. Or a war of words. Lawrence Myers always preferred the latter. Not because he was soft. He was young enough to know of Vietnam through history books and the memory of a father never returning from war. Iraq was a fresh wound that suppurated. Even a triumphant nation limps from the injuries of war. Its shell-shocked mind becomes tentative, jittery—wavering at best, breeding distrust from friend and foe alike. He couldn't contemplate another war. Even though his world teetered on the precarious brink of it.

It was 9.30 P.M., Friday, the week before Thanksgiving— the night Susan Conner plodded through Leland's files— that Larry Myers caught the first glimpse of doom.

He was forty-nine, five-nine in wingtips, always upright (despite perpetual sixteen-hour work days), lean-muscled and balding. Larry Myers wore his remaining hair in a buzz cut (done by his favorite barber in the Watergate Complex), which didn't really work to hide the fact there was precious little of it— healthy dark brown remnants growing neat, a few inches around the ears— from the sideburns up to the shiny scalp, a reasonable amount posterior to his tonsure, fading out high above the nape of his neck.

Servile interns and overtly ambitious White House staffers said he resembled a younger Bruce Willis— on account of the nose and that mischievous grin. Myers himself thought he was more like Ed Harris in the actor's younger, handsomer days.

Supremely fit, Larry Myers, maniacal workaholic, was obsessive about order and control. Taking his power shakes with Siberian ginseng, Spirulina and Gingko, he

was the kind of man who only sweated in the gym or sauna. An anachronism of sorts. A man in the Hoover tradition. An investor in the human information market— particularly the weakness of prominent men and men of potential prominence. In short, he was a collector of the closeted skeletons that rendered people controllable. The ownership of men and women garnered far more power than the ownership of respect. His collection, he knew, would someday prove to be his and the president's most invaluable asset.

"And all this for you, Madam President," he said, gazing at a portrait on his desk. The Washington Post photographer had captured the essence of the most powerful woman in the world as she stood at the podium delivering her victory speech. Confetti raining down on her, the bright lights twinkling in her moist eyes and her blond hair haloed in the glare, she was also the most beautiful woman in the world, Larry thought.

This night however, his assets appeared to be doing him little good. He was in his office in the West Wing of the White House. A phone had begun ringing, the incessant resonance annoying him. Myers tried to ignore it. The president's right-hand man was hard at work poring over CIA dossiers, Pentagon briefs, computers humming with dark secrets, and the escalating threats of war. Most of the staffers had left for the day. The place was nice and quiet— until the damned phone . . . He found himself grimacing again, allowing the pressure to get to him, and he winced at missing the beat.

Myers calmed down with a spell of controlled breathing. It consoled him that there'd never been a time like the one he was going through now. He could not remember a day in the last hundred that hadn't been hectic, the last few being exceptionally tough. He focused once more on the screens. Four hundred thousand NK soldiers were massing on the north side of the DMZ, Israel was threatening a military strike against a posturing nuclear-capable Iran. US friendly President Musharraf had resigned under the popular groundswell of Islamic Extremism. Activity around

Taliban/Al-Qaeda-friendly Pakistan's nuke sites were also increasing.

The Atlantic and Pacific Fleets were on full alert. Diplomats clutched briefcases and nervously approached old allies grown weary with the constant rattling of sabers.

Each of two twenty-two inch displays was split three ways giving six views of classified satellite and high-altitude Predator drone imagery. Classified CIA data constantly streamed in. A couple of mouse clicks zoomed him down from the sky to count individual heads, to study enemy terrain. The Chief of Staff ignored hunger pangs. He hated those mortal interjections which were more an annoyance than a reminder that his last sit-down meal had been twenty-four hours ago. There'd been one high-powered meeting after another these last couple of days, followed not often, or regularly enough, by his high-powered drinks. There appeared to be no end in sight to this frenetic time. The Situation Room was manned by a 24/7 team. The diary on his desk carried an endless list of conflicts still not scheduled for the president's agenda.

And then Myer's mind was briefly distracted by another concern . . . this personal matter threatening the president. Myers paused, massaged his eyeballs with the heels of his palms—this goddamned shit that was bigger than Armageddon itself.

Anyway, he turned to the screens again. To make matters worse around here, some of these spy photos had been leaked to the press, keeping the Administration busy these last couple of days. Now the White House had to prepare for the hounds.

Tomorrow morning there was the breakfast meeting with the CIA chief. Myers had to brief the president before then. After that it was another hour of discussion, briefing and rehearsal before the president's televised announcement to the nation.

He was vaguely aware that the ringing had stopped. Now it started up again.

Myers sighed. He loved the game almost as much as he loved his boss, maybe even more. Under different circumstances he would've welcomed this—a foreign crisis

to show the mettle of the president; in truth, the strength of the woman he adored, the first female president of the US. What could be better than fervent adversaries threatening the freedom of the world for the entire nation to rally around its leader? But none of this was necessary right now. The president's popularity was at an all-time-high— the highest for any president in history and just perfect for the midterm campaigns which were to begin in a few months. And Myers couldn't risk ruining that with a personal blunder, which would certainly happen once his boss discovered her personal thing which endangered the Oval Office.

She was unwavering, insightful. Had won over traditional allies distanced from the previous president. Above all, she was compassionate. Just months into her presidency, the US had ceased being seen as Big Bully, and had become the friendly big sister. At a time like this, she was the only leader who could cut the path of peace.

That's where the New York crisis came in. If matters there got out of control, not only would there be a grave national crisis, but an international one as well.

Myers grimaced again at the phone. Goddammit. He'd left explicit instructions with the switchboard. He wouldn't be taking calls for the evening. So why the hell—

Then it dawned – *the trilling wasn't from the regular phone*— and he lunged for one of his two cellphones hooked up to chargers on the credenza.

Myers whispered, "What do you have?"

"New York's sizzling, Chief," the caller said. "A little too hot for comfort."

"In late fucking fall?" Myers cupped the mouthpiece with his free hand, even though the phone was more secure than those used by the CIA and there was no one around but the sentry outside his door.

"Yeah. Butterfly effect. El Nino's supposed to be someplace else, but it's screwing with more than the weather . . ."

“Cut the BS.”

The caller cleared his throat. “The doc made some kinda pick-up. Might be it.”

“You said she was with the *fucking cops*.”

“Flew the coop, right under their noses, Chief.”

“And?”

“Lost her at Grand Central. She’s on the street somewh— ”

“On the street. With the fucking files? Oh Jesus—” He ended the call. Suddenly the threat of a North Korean invasion of the South and a nuclear strike against the US felt like trifles. Glancing at the portrait on his desk, Myers tried to imagine that face, regal through the toughest times, crumbling in disgrace and ruin. He cursed himself for taking his eye off New York. Cursed Carl Bentley too and made a mental note to destroy the Professor when this was over. That fucking pervert had kept secrets from him— about Leland who’d stolen medical files, about that nurse who’d been killed.

Myers wasn’t entirely convinced Bentley was truthful about Leland— that he’d been stealing data for rivals, unaware they contained information fatal to the White House, that his death was an accident. That had been bad enough. Now this Dr Susan Conner was on the run with the files. Myers breathed slowly. Thank God, his man in New York had picked up on things. But the guy was only a watch, a one man band. With the doctor on the street, on the run, there was still time to rein this in.

Myer’s mind churned. “Yes,” he whispered. He owned just the man who could do this for him. Speed dialing the number for FBI Director Gene-Ives Burton, Myers already had his plan of action. They’d activate the Feds in New York, call in all assets, cast the widest net then put the treasonous bitch out of commission.

36***Professor Carl W Bentley, Manhattan.***

IT'S A GIVEN THAT if you harbored the kind of secret whose revelation could destroy you, then you were susceptible to complete control by those privy to that secret.

Carl Bentley understood this universal truth perfectly while slumped over his desk, head in hands. Several times he'd begun dialing Styles' number, only to chicken out. This thing with Susan Conner had spiraled beyond control. The media pressure was unbearable. He'd already called Myers, fed him a cover about events at the hospital to keep him appeased, while terrified of what Myers would do if he knew the truth.

This was the situation he'd dreaded ever since he'd been coerced into toeing Styles' crooked line. The killings had become one vicious cycle of horror. And now, so close to the light, the walls of deceit were disintegrating all around him.

Damn Susan Conner.

Just when he'd thought everything had been sealed with the death of Leland, that his secrets were safe, she'd come along with her self-righteous ideals. And the worse this got, the more precarious his position with Styles and his henchmen became.

Damned Styles.

And then there was his pact with the White House. His heart rate accelerated. What a major, potentially fatal liability that had become.

Goddamn Larry Myers.

The call had come from Myers weeks before the start of the trials. Bentley beamed with pride. A request from the White House for something only he could do for his country. Even though he was troubled by how much Myers knew about the project,

Bentley said it would be the greatest honor to serve the White House.

Then he remembered the hours' long briefing with Styles. Recalled that huge room in Sloane-Wright House with sentries in shadows, watching him sign the contracts that effectively relinquished ownership of his life, for the glory he knew was sure to be his. He recalled the intimidating non-disclosure clauses. He shuddered as he pictured Styles' one-eyed gaze, which seemed to bore through his brain.

Bentley had considered the negative implications of a conspiracy with the White House. By acceding to Myers, he'd effectively be breaking all of Styles' rules. So he'd declined. But Myers had countered with an offer Bentley dared not refuse.

Carl Bentley shivered now, racked by mortal fear of what Styles would do to him, what Myers *could* do to him. Rather Styles than Myers, he decided.

The initial lure had been money and the immortal fame of bringing SW500 to the world. Then came the setbacks, the glitches, the coverups. And then the murders.

"Damn you, Carl! Damn you for everything your life has been, and for everything you've allowed it to become."

He eyed his phone. Wondered if he'd ever have the courage to make the most important call of his life, inform Styles of his deal with the White House—a deal that could ruin him and Sloane-Wright. His only hope lay in explaining it had been blackmail—Myers was privy to his sordid past. Bentley winced at his own terrible mistake—the rape of the patient under anesthesia, the coverup with the DA in Houston—

But rather Styles than Myers. Raising his head off of his wet hands, he dialed Styles' number once again. *I am just a victim*, he repeated. This would be his justification to Styles, this would be his reason to beg for mercy from the worse of two men who owned his pathetic life: That he was powerless, a victim of blackmail.

37

HE WAS A HUGE man. When he grinned his mouth sagged, distorting the pocked face, revealing yellowed teeth. The subject of his glee was a faxed document he'd just received, detailing his prey's movements. It was a veritable paper trail in the wake of Amex card swipes, which drew a bead on Dr Susan Conner's present location.

SUSAN WOKE SLOWLY, shivering in the chill of air-conditioning. Her sweat-soaked T-shirt clung to her body despite the cold. Her heart pounded, her mental state dawdling some place beyond bewilderment. In degrees her consciousness returned, extracting itself from a vortex of her familiar nightmares.

She'd been there again, in her dark bedroom, Robert dying in their bed, a dark heavy figure astride her, a hand claspings her mouth and nose. And the small voice at the bedroom door only moments before everything she ever loved had been rent from her.

She scanned the gloom. *Where am I?*

The digital clock flashed 07:55. She took in the TV console, the chairs, tables, the heavy drapes framed by morning light and remembered.

With recollection came the inevitable pain—a thudding hangover from the junk food, the late night. And something more. Reluctantly leaving bed, she drew the drapes and resumed her reading of the file from last night. Perhaps the morning after would shed more light to reject the incredulous. She studied the file for patient PX3, age forty-seven. At first she'd thought the P-WH stood for Patient, or Private (patient), White House. She was aware Bentley made weekly trips to DC, presumably as part of some government AIDS program. But after watching the president on CNN, it dawned on her

that Leland's discovery was huge, indeed. Could the P refer to the president? And was Bentley making House calls to the White House to treat the president?

In the clarity of daylight, it was a huge jump to make that deduction. Hard to believe the president was a test patient. More likely, someone close to her, or someone high in government for whom she'd arranged the treatment. But no, Susan concluded, it had to be the president. P-WH. President-White House. And she was forty-seven-years-old. It was no secret that her husband, late Senator William Madison had been a philanderer, sleeping with a string of models and young interns. Though only fifty, his suddenly failing health and untimely death convinced her he'd caught and passed on the disease to his much younger wife, and now President Valerie Madison.

Susan sat. Gooseflesh inexplicably rose on her arms and she glanced at the door. The thrill of danger was there, but of uncertain provenance. She frowned. More confused now than she'd been yesterday. The files only raised more questions.

Leland had died for possessing this information. *What would he have done, if he were still alive?* He was an intelligent man with a plan. Only, he'd failed to reach the FBI because those who wished to silence him had always known where he was. Perhaps it was up to her now to make the contact while no one knew her whereabouts.

The FBI card in Leland's stash—She found it, made the call to Agent Fielding's cell while reminding herself to be careful. Leland had labeled the Flash confidential for a reason. Without knowing its contents, she couldn't simply violate that wish.

Getting an 'out-of-service' message, she frowned, tried repeatedly with the same result. Next she tried the landline number for the FBI's Manhattan field office, hoping he worked Saturdays.

The dispatcher demanded her identity and reason for the call.

"It's a private call, confidential, for Agent Brent Fielding, please. I can't reveal

my name until I speak with him.”

There was audible hesitation on the line, which went dead for a moment before a male voice came on. Susan got a repeat of the ID routine, and repeated her answer, only this time she shut her eyes, felt her heart miss a beat. *Please let him be in*, she prayed.

Presently, she got another male voice— this one exuding seniority, its tone authoritative. She heard a name. But it wasn’t Fielding.

“What’s the nature of your business with Agent Fielding, Ma’am?”

She sighed at tones reminiscent of her earlier dealings with the FBI. A year and a half ago, they’d exasperated her this very way— with their bland, but persistent propriety. “Just tell him it’s about Dr Harvey Leland, NYU’s Clinical Research Unit. Something that happened three or four months ago. He’ll know.”

“Fielding’s off duty, Ma’am. Perhaps I can be of help.”

“No. I need to speak with Agent Fielding. Is there a number you can give me? He’s not answering his cellphone.”

“I’m handling his cases in his absence. I’ll be able to help you. What’s the nature of this information you have, Ma’am?”

“It’s important, sensitive, the kind I can only give to Agent Fielding. You see, a man—Dr Harvey Leland—died because of these files and I have them with me . . .”

There was another pause. Longer, this time.

“Truth is, Agent Fielding was killed on duty a few months ago. About the same time as Dr Leland—” Again a pause. A whispered voice in the background. “If you have Dr Leland’s package, we believe you are in grave danger because of those files and I . . . we can help you, Dr Conner. That’s what we’re here for. If you just stay where you are, we can send someone to the hotel, to bring you in, protect you—”

38

ON THE TWENTY-FOURTH floor of the Federal Building on Broadway, Manhattan, FBI Special Agent in Charge, Jim Gallagher, studied the map on his computer screen. The tall, mid-fortyish, graying blond, Sam Shepherd lookalike, had just been speaking with Dr Susan Conner, when the line went dead. The graphic he was now looking at very much resembled an *anywho.com* line map, but was in fact a simplified form of the street grid target for the doctor's location.

They'd just picked up her trail of plastic, of course, but she could've left by now. So this was a bonus, a certainty of her current location. The directive to bring her in had come from Gene-Ives Burton himself, eminent Director of the FBI. His men were already on their way, were probably outside the hotel by now. They'd have her within the hour.

DETECTIVE SEAN O'HARA, NYPD Homicide Division sat at his desk looking haggard in stale clothing. The skin around his eyes was creased from chain-smoking through the night. The veins on his temples bulged and spread like a spidery bruise. Despite his best efforts, the doctor hadn't surfaced yet. All his endeavors against an amateur, fruitless. The APB, the blown up photos, the extra men hauled in for the job— all for nothing so far. Even the sighting at the hospital hadn't panned. It had come on a plate and he'd let it slip. Something that definitely wouldn't light up his record. Furthermore, Baines had been his most recent conquest and now she was in hospital recuperating from wounds inflicted by Dr Susan Conner.

To make this 'piece a shit' worse, some fuckin hot shot Wasp from the FBI

downtown, was on the line about the 'Conner Case':

" . . .It's an ongoing Federal investigation, Detective O'Hara." The man was saying. "The Bureau would be grateful if you guys just backed off this one and allowed us to take it from here on. The doctor's our problem now."

O'Hara baulked. "Like you in my face, pal." A cigarette bobbed at the edge of his lips. The precinct's no-smoking policy evidently held no jurisdiction around the detective's desk with its cluttered ashtrays. "Look, Agent 'Whoever-The-Fuck', NYPD's done all the legwork on this one and I intend to bring the doctor in. You're just gonna havta wait your turn. Besides, you're just a voice on the phone right now, and I gotta get back to work."

"Wait, Detective. Bureau's not looking to muscle in on your jurisdiction. We respect the effort you've put in. But we do have something you don't. Something we can give you—the doctor's location. Now, I could have the federal authorizations sent down to you, if it's what you're asking. But all I'm looking for is a favor here. Off the record. One I'll gladly repay."

"The kinda favor where the Feds get the glory and the locals dick?"

"A twenty-four-hour window. We step in, do our business, step out. After that, we'll hand you the doctor. My word on that. No one has to know the details. Call the switchboard here, ask them to patch you through to my office if you need confirmation. What do you say?"

39

“DR CONNER. THE HOTEL.” She gasped at how easily she’d been located.

Susan rocked with disbelief. The notion that Sloane-Wright could so easily silence agents of the FBI compounded her dread. She felt certain Fielding had been murdered for the same reason Leland had been. It simply could not be coincidence— the timing, the connection between her predecessor and Fielding, the agent’s promise of protection. She imagined an evil force at work here too powerful for her to fight. She felt certain now that the FBI was no longer an avenue of hope for her.

Shocked and confused in that unfamiliar room, it felt as if she were locked in some Russian doll of nightmares— rousing from one only to find herself hopelessly trapped within another.

Without the FBI and the police, what was her next move? Who could she turn to for help? She felt dizzy, disoriented, the unnerving bouts recurring more intensely now. As a doctor she realized how dangerous concussion could be. In her early years working the ER, she’d seen a simple headache progress to a terminal coma within hours. She knew how imperative it was for her to get rest and treatment soon. Until then, she had to keep focused, figure the meaning of it all. Replacing the phone, she clasped her hands tightly together, willing herself to concentrate . . .

Gradually it became less incredulous that the president or someone close to her could be one of the private patients. It’s why Leland had been trying to contact the White House— the president *had* to know what was going on at the hospital. Distrusting local authorities, the FBI was Leland’s only link to Washington. Now it fell upon her to get the package to its destination.

But how? Via e-mail?

Everyone knew the President's address—`president@whitehouse.gov`. But that was an illusion. Mail routed to the White House, electronic or otherwise, would be checked and analyzed—sanitized before getting anywhere near the First Desk. Calling the White House would be just as ineffective as her call to the FBI.

The FBI. God she had to get out of here before they arrived. It occurred to her if the FBI had figured her whereabouts, the killer and the police could've figured that too.

As she grabbed her things and yanked up the knapsack to leave, her spiral notebook tumbled out. It landed on the carpet open to the first page where she'd written:

—Discoverer / Principal Sc / Team

Dr Vincent Sebastian Bach.

That name again, the way it made her feel, tripped something in her brain triggering a sensory awakening within her . . . Like nostalgia—the mink-colored living room in their small cottage in the Back Bay when she was little. Her father's poetry readings—Pound, Poe, Whitman—his voice melting into Mozart, Beethoven . . . Bach.

That name. She ran her fingers over it, closed her eyes. The articles told her he'd sold his work to Sloane-Wright, agreeing to a six-month collaboration period. *Was he still with them? A part of what was going on? If not, what would he do if he found out?*

Unable to find a phone book in the room, she called the concierge. He gave her an address in the East Village. Scribbling the info on hotel stationery, she tore the piece of paper and checked the Visitors' New York City Map on the desk.

As creator of SW500, Bach was at ground zero, the figure at the root of this dream, this Kafkaesque nightmare into which she'd been cast. Surely he was worth interviewing.

Am I clutching at straws here? She sighed. What else could she do? As hope

slammed shut on her, it was reasonable to keep even the remotest option alive.

THE MAN WITH the pockmarked face grinned as he flashed a fake NYPD detective's gold shield in the hotel receptionist's face then rode the elevator up to room 507.

Outside *The Journey's End* hotel, his partner waited. In a gray Ford this time. Not the beat-up van from the Bronx

SHE WAS ABOUT to grab the door handle of her room when someone on the outside grabbed it first. Muted steps, a faint click. The hairs on her back rose, her mouth went dry. She stopped breathing.

A voice from the other side: "Dr Conner, this is the police. Open the door, now."

She checked the peephole. Not the police or the FBI. She recognized that face from outside the library, and at Grand Central.

Breathing hard, she crept along the wall, away from the door, her heart racing. She began to chew her fingernails. *What now?* Her eyes darted about the room for an answer. She unshouldered the knapsack and reached into it, just as muffled blasts caused her to recoil. A loud crunching sound as the door flew open amidst an explosion of splinters showering her. The doorjamb disintegrated and the burly man came lumbering in. He held his gun out, away from his body gripped in both hands.

The door had come off its hinges, slammed down against a wooden stand holding a vase with fake flowers.

He took a long moment to realize she was standing behind where his momentum had landed him. He stumbled, then began turning, his gun coming round in a horizontal arc toward her. For an interminable moment, listening to his loud grunting, she froze.

The trickle of warm liquid down her legs caused her to blink. Baines' gun from

the knapsack was in her hand, aimed at his head. She was shaking, a curious mixture of embarrassment, fear and anger caused her to squeeze the trigger. But nothing happened. She squeezed again. Nothing. The heavy gun was a foreign thing to her. She should've released the safety or something.

The lumbering man had regained his balance, his gun almost completing its arc. Instinctively, she jerked her arm back and slammed the gun against the side of his head.

He stopped, stunned, suspended in mid motion.

She burst through the open doorway, into the corridor, split seconds beyond him. A euphoric, hysterical rush at the prospect of freedom.

Only, something caught her in mid-stride, brutally yanking the collar of the sweater against her throat, gagging her.

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HER SWEATER HAD snagged in the jagged doorjamb. She tugged desperately, glimpsing her attacker's yellow grin just as the sweater ripped free.

Breathless, whimpering like a child, she bounded down the carpeted corridor and through the fire-escape.

Beyond the confines of the room it ceased to be a real contest: he the large pursuer, she lighter, more agile with her athletic past. Baines' gun was stuck in her hand, clasped by her rigid grip, causing people in the lobby and out on the sidewalk to shriek and leap out of her path. The weapon had become a lead-weight but it had saved her—an asset she shoved into her backpack on the run.

The pack swayed and bounced as she hurtled down sidewalks, moving in the general direction of Central Park. She entered the larger stores, in one entrance, out the other, eventually losing herself in the Saturday morning crowds.

Finally, she stopped. Rasping from both terror and exhaustion, she turned around and scoured the coast. Relieved at not spotting Pockmark anywhere, she broke down, her body shaking uncontrollably, teeth chattering, her saliva thick, choking, lungs ablaze. Every muscle was firing at once, taking her body into meltdown.

Pulling into an alley somewhere, she noticed it was a dead end, but she didn't care. It was daylight this time round, so she felt better. All she wanted was to be out of the traffic, the crowds, the traitorous open space. As she hid between a couple of Dumpsters, the smallest noises grew to a deafening amplitude— the blood rushing through her ears, her wild sobs, her rasping breathing, all resonating like thunder through the tunnel of her mind.

Time passed . . . Ten, fifteen minutes, hard to tell cowering within the noise of her unfamiliar world, its dissonant turmoil as acute as her physical pain. She emerged gingerly, wiping her face with clammy palms to navigate her way out of the alley. Her pants were wet, she must be a real mess. But rationality had long since fallen through her shredded reality. There was only the residual whimpering, the skittish eyes and the inexplicable thing she decided to do next without caring to pause, to carefully consider. The need to do it was deep-seated, intuitive. It overrode her sense of danger. Like the first time she'd sensed trouble at the hospital, rushed headlong toward it, became trapped in the cesspool only to be spewed out into this insane parallel universe . . .

There was a name that wouldn't leave her now. SW500 was his baby. He'd spawned it then given it up for adoption. *Would he help her or lead her to her death?*

Out on the wide street, she literally threw herself in front of a cab to stop it, dove in, crouched low, her eyes wide wary.

Scrambling upright, she saw the cabby's questioning eyes in the mirror.

"Where to?"

She began digging in the backpack for the slip of paper in vain, but Bach's address spilt from her lips, as clearly as the concierge had spoken it.

She hadn't the faintest clue what she'd achieve with this move. Down to her bones, she could feel everything about her off-kilter. Twice, she opened her mouth, leaned forward to tell the driver to turn the cab around then broke off. Her mind came up with no alternatives. So be it, she thought, leaning back, closing her eyes under the pale autumn sunlight floating through the dusty window. Floating, floating, specks shimmering like radiation in her small rectangle of light . . .

Have I told you lately that I love you . . . Have I told you there's . . .

The words wafted off the cab's speakers like fog that sculpted Robert's face,

carrying his malted voice to her with its sweet sentimentality. "Oh God," she whimpered, clutching her breast. Then she laughed. In his awful singing voice he'd croon the Van Morrison song whenever he was sad, alone, pottering in the garage or pruning a rose bush in their back garden— even though it was a song of celebration, of reaffirmation of love.

At the end of the ten minute ride, she paid with a twenty and stepped out into the bright day enjoying the autumn chill on her wet cheeks.

The sun hovered low, its residue gilding the smog and sprawl of dense low rises. Mingled with garbage, vehicle fumes and dust, the scent of blacktop rose lazily through the air. She blinked. *Was this where a wealthy famous scientist lived?* She'd read about the district going through some kind of renaissance, evident in the presence of construction crews all over, working overtime, trying to keep some deadline. Protective mesh in dusty green and black, ballooned and sagged like seine nets.

She was surprised to find no doorman at the lobby. *What did this guy do with all his money?* She pressed the buzzer for 'Bach'. Cameras on either side of the steel-barred entrance, and the purple-hued lens spying on her from the box above the buzzer, made her self-conscious. Her heart went like a kettledrum when the intercom squawked.

Her voice caught. Clearing her throat, she replied with the first alias that popped into her head. "It's- Er . . . It's M-Ms. Holmes . . . C-Cynthia Holmes, from the *Times*, for Dr Vincent Sebastian Bach, please."

A prolonged silence. Then, "*The New York Times?*"

"Uh huh."

"You have an appointment?"

She tried to keep the edge out of her voice. *Keep calm.* A quick glance at her watch. "An appointment? Er- yes, yes I believe so. I've been out of town. Came right

over. Haven't set foot in the office yet. Er- my editor e-mailed me about an interview set up for Saturday 11:00 A.M. with Dr Bach. Please don't tell me it's been canceled. Or worse, my editor mixed up his dates. I'm just having the worst day of my life already."

There was a long silence this time. It felt as though she were being watched, studied. She nervously looked up at the cameras.

"No. Afraid there's no entry on Dr Bach's schedule about this. And he's an extremely busy man. Why don't you call Monday to set something up?"

"Er, w-wait, please. I'd just need a couple of minutes. Seeing that I'm here, already? If you could just let Dr Bach know that it's regarding recent events at the NYU, SW500 trials. I have a deadline. I promise not to be long and- and . . ." remembering something she'd read in the library, she added, "If you could just let him know there'll be no cameras, no photographs."

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Dr Vincent Sebastian Bach, East Village

THE FIRST TREMOR should have warned Susan to expect trouble.

It happened as the elevator opened into a sepia-colored hallway. She looked across to a painting of the Mona Lisa. Poked her head out, wondering about a host, when she noticed the place had assumed the flamingo hues of dusk. The Mona Lisa had vanished. In its place, a Monet— Water-Lilies On A Pond.

The second tremor came when she stepped out and the doors closed behind her, cutting off any means of escape. The quaking ground threw her off her feet. “Good Lord,” she cried, as the floor beneath her crumbled, seemed to send her hurtling to the streets below. Her screams were lost in the jarring thunder. She thrashed about for a handhold. Gusts of air whooshed up, buffeted her as she plummeted through floor after disintegrating floor in an avalanche of choking dust.

Then suddenly, the air cleared and she saw the street below rushing up too fast. There was a fluttering sound, like a sail in the wind. She heard a whooping cry and glimpsed a giant turquoise hang-glider swooping down toward her. At the moment of impact, when the pilot reached out, tried to catch her, she shrieked.

And the world blacked out.

Everything went bright and quiet after that. She became aware of the cool floor against her cheek, her strident breathing, the Mona Lisa smiling above her. A stranger, backlit by a filmy haze loomed, leaned over, held out his hand.

Fear stabbed her gut. Cut through the surreal mire she felt holding her down. Heightened her awareness so that when the stranger spoke, the timbre of his deep voice

touched her, made her flinch.

“The earth move for you too?” he said.

Was he chuckling?

“Here lemme help you up Ms Cynthia Holmes.”

She shook her head. Her ragged throat made it hard to swallow, to speak. Her knees wobbled when she rose. She shambled forward, hoarse. “What the hell?”

“Exactly. The “Hell” in Hello. Beta version of my latest interactive welcome. Way cosmic, don’t you think?” He cocked an eyebrow, wayward strands of his long black hair falling over mischief twinkling in his dark eyes.

She tilted her head, squinted. Lights changed about them, altering the tone of his skin, making it gleam, darkening his eyes. It was, she thought, like looking and listening to someone through a prism. Barefoot, in faded Levis and a black T shirt that strained against his long torso, he stood a shade shorter than her six feet. Beneath the mildly goofy look, was a strong face, firm jaw, a dimpled chin.

“That was damned insane.”

“Insane’s good I guess. Most of the responses so far were in the range of “hardcore” to “ultra radical”. As I said, it’s just a beta version. Some glitches to purge. Great thing is, all the responses were totally spontaneous.”

“You could trigger a *spontaneous* coronary with that irresponsible stunt.”

“Yeah. But *New York Times* journalists are obviously made of sterner stuff.”

Smiling, he eased a few steps back and indicated the floor. There was something fluid and easy, yet unnerving about him. A looseness, suppleness, as though he moved outside her reality. She briefly wondered if this wasn’t a response to her beleaguered life—some dream detour in her unending nightmare.

“ . . . Designed it myself,” he was saying. “Intel-linked tri-gimbal base,

holographic image projectors, 12.1 Actual Surround Sound, giant LCD under the glass tiles. Amuses my wacky friends who're immune to things as banal as coronaries. Truth is, hardly anyone else visits." He smiled, the twinkle in his eye again. "And definitely never a fugitive from the law before . . . By the way that was yours truly attempting the intrepid hang-glider rescue." Taking a little bow, he extended his hand. "Vincent Sebastian Bach. Pleased to meet you— no, wait, backspace that and retype: *Curious* and *surprised* to meet you, Dr Susan Conner."

"Wha—?" Susan snubbed the proffered hand and backed away toward the elevator. Her breathing quickening once again.

Bach held up a hand. "Whoa, hey . . . relax. I might've figured who you are. But I haven't sounded the alarm. I swear."

"But h-how'd you know?"

"Your face is all over the news. That disguise may fool the cops, but not me. And that's cute," he indicated her top, "But hardly suitable attire for a *Times* journalist."

She glanced down. Noticed her ripped sweater, her cleavage and reddened. Turning around, she banged her fist repeatedly against the elevator call button.

"Hey, Dr Conner, wait. There can't be many options out there for you right now. And I think you'd welcome a change of clothes, a drink. Besides, if I'd meant harm, you'd already be out there with the cops by now. Think about it."

"Then . . . why . . . if you know who I am . . . ?"

He shrugged. "Guess I'm a sucker for mystery. I'm intrigued by why you came to me—and how you know I hate photographs."

"H-How do I know there isn't someone from Sloane-Wright on their way up right now? You recognized me on the video only moment's ago."

"Sloane-Wright? What've they got to do with this? I thought you were running

from the cops.”

She sighed, her eyes instantly moistening at his ignorance, his innocence.

A TRAY OF drinks and Saran-wrapped snacks awaited her in his living room. Without the trickery of lighting, he looked younger, the hair on his arms crisp, his shaved jaw shadowed by the blue sheen of a dense growth. His eyes appeared cold, his gaze quick, vigilant, giving him an almost lupine quality. And yet he seemed bereft now of the nocent vibes she'd got from him earlier.

Who are you, Vincent Bach?

He gestured at the wingback chair opposite him as he opened a newspaper. “There’s a piece about you,” he said.

Hovering at the entrance, she studied him. She was wearing a dark-blue T-shirt and jeans that fit almost perfectly. Even the underwear wrapped in the bundle he'd offered her was about the right size. She was intrigued that the clothing still bore their store tags.

She was self-conscious or rather embarrassed by her outbursts earlier, the way she'd railed against this . . . playful man. I mean, this was Dr Vincent Sebastian Bach, after all, the man who'd outshone his greatest contemporaries.

“What . . . ?”

“I expected this geeky, ancient, bearded professor.”

He snorted. “Story of my life. If it's any consolation, I may be twenty-eight, but I feel a fossil around people my own age. Always have. Something I've gotten used to since first grade. Teachers would parade me when I solved twelfth grade math problems. Seniors badgered me about calculus and when their computer programs failed. Kids my age avoided me and adults looked at me like I was some curiosity. It's

why I loathe photos. It's like a circus once they see how young I really am."

"What's so bad about that?"

"You mean when people realize I'm not your geeky ancient bearded professor? For one thing my work isn't taken seriously. For another, nobody's interested in the science- only my private life. And that's the point at which I get kicked out of the scientific journals and into *Esquire*. In terms of medical research, the notion of a sage, bearded old scientist is so tightly bound to the human psyche, it's bewildering." He inclined his head, neat black eyebrows raised. "Know something really weird?" He chuckled. "There was a time, a couple of years ago at the height of my . . . well, notoriety, if you will . . . These media guys would take pictures of me, newspaper, TV. Then I'd come back here, get online, crack into their computer systems- CNN, CBS, NBC, *The Times*, *Post*- and I'd delete or modify their graphic files. To cover the rare few who'd used analog systems- hard copy- I used to get into their company networks and issue urgent interoffice memos from the top instructing the copies to be shredded or discarded to avoid litigation. Kinda cosmic trick don't you think—" Bach stopped when he noticed her wringing her hands, a pinched expression on her face. He coughed. "Well, anyway, let's hear what you came to the geeky ancient bearded professor for."

"I'm not sure." She paused. "It's a long, complex story. The short of it is that I'm not only running from the police. Yesterday at work someone tried to kill me . . ."

"And this has something to do with Sloane-Wright, the trials?"

Susan nodded. "There're problems and I—" She tried to control her hands which had begun to shake. Already her nausea and headache were returning. She noticed her knapsack on an armchair next to Vincent. "Sorry. I just need something." She opened her purse and paled. Her pills were not there. Nor in the rest of the knapsack. Must've left them back at the hotel, she thought, wincing as the throbbing in her head intensified.

Vincent leaned forward. "You okay? Get you something?"

"Please . . . for the pain . . . the attack at the hospital. I may have concussion."

"Sure. In the kitchen. Maybe we should get you checked. Last time I practiced medicine was in Med School, so I'm—"

"Self-medicating will have to do. I can't risk public places right now."

The kitchen glistened with granite, polished wood and silverware. A hammered copper extractor shimmered above the island cooker. She noticed an incongruous row of four flat screen displays set into a raised panel. On the screens, live pictures of the streets, the lobby, elevators.

Vincent opened a double cupboard and presented a veritable mini drugstore. Boxes, packages, bottles of medication still sealed, in neat rows.

"Never know when you gonna need something. I like to be prepared—"

Susan wasn't listening. Giddy at the sight, she lunged past him, took one box after another, filling both hands until she glimpsed his curious expression and stopped. She feigned studying labels. "Just looking for the right stuff."

"Guess I'll just leave you to it then. There's bottled water in the refrigerator. Yell if you need anything."

Back in the living room, she sat and smiled wanly at him. "This is so kind of you, Dr Bach. I mean, considering what you know."

"That you're innocent, *Dr Conner*. Want me to explain how I know that?"

"Please." She gave him a bemused look.

"Well, I'm a scientist, but sometimes a hunch speaks more truth than evidence. You certainly don't look like a murderer." He laughed. "Then again, maybe I'm just a sucker for a beautiful woman."

She made a face.

"But, if I were Sherlock Holmes," he indicated the *Times* article about events at the hospital. "I'd be thinking, 'Now why would a doctor, having access to the best mind-blowing drugs, kill for a few pitiful vials of morphine?'"

Susan squirmed.

"Regarding your prints on the weapon-- It's the ER and you didn't think to wear gloves? He gestured at the way she held her drink. "And I guess they found that weapon in your right hand, when you're left-handed. Which incidentally," he laughed, "Is something I could've only figured after seeing you."

She smiled. For the second time in his presence, her eyes moistened. Except for his naiveté about the drugs, he was right. Her initial trepidation waned, the tone of their conversations calming. As the minutes passed, she reveled in the sanctuary of his home.

Vincent lamented the callousness of the authorities. "I can't believe they'd haul in a doctor without the proper investigation. Jesus. What you must've gone through."

"Well it's been sheer hell till now. I really appreciate this, Vincent."

"Don't mention it. Just tell me what's happening, and how I can help."

She studied his face, trying to find the tell-tale sign of mistrust. Then shook her head, amazed at having just walked off the street and found someone willing to stand in her corner. Even as she felt the touch of elation, though, she found herself scanning the room, her eyes darting to doors and windows as wariness tingled.

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SUSAN BEGAN WITH a little about Eileen, mentioning that the nurse was about to reveal a secret about the trials before she was killed. "There's so much more, Vincent. I'll tell you everything I know, but . . . before that, I need some information from you."

"Sure. About what?"

"About the Hypothesis. SW500. I know the theory— the multilevel mode of assault on the virus: recognition, suppression of viral genome incorporated within host DNA, messenger RNA interference, multi-enzyme disruption with reduced attachment of virus to T-cells . . ." She went on before taking a breath. "God, it's so amazing, I know. In theory, a remarkable, miraculous MOA— and all in one therapy to boot. But I have to know how genuine it is."

Vincent coughed out the root beer he was sipping.

"Genuine? Like, is it some kinda high-tech con?"

She shrugged. "Well . . . is it?"

"Under the circumstances, won't *you* be the better prepared one to answer that?"

"I guess. It's the reason I'm here." She brought him up to speed about Tyrone, her experiences at the CRU, about the files, Leland's suspicions. "I need to know about the long term studies . . . if there were any."

Shifting in his seat, he downed his drink and looked away. Vincent appeared clearly perturbed, his visible unease more intense than she'd expected. When he faced her again, she noticed his breathing had quickened.

"You're kidding me, right?" he finally said, rising from his seat. He searched her face: "I guess not. So . . . what the hell happened to my cure? We covered all the bases.

It was perfect. The rest— the clinical program, the trials, FDA approval— was supposed to be mere formality.” He pushed his long hair away from his face and whispered to himself. “Why didn’t they come to me if there was a major glitch?”

“The long term studies, Vincent?” Susan persisted. “How could something like this get through to the clinical stage without some kind of long term projection?”

He flinched almost imperceptibly as he flashed back to Sarty. “Christ. The average time from drawing board to production for a major drug is around fifteen years. Decades in most cases. It’s why drug companies are so protective, why they try to keep a bestseller out there forever. For SW500 . . . There was— there is— no time, no long term.” He smiled wryly at her. “You’re specialist in infectious diseases, right? What do you know about the Apocalypse Scenario, the Apocalypse Strain?”

“It’s the kind of stuff bandied about in the peripheral literature. The microbiological equivalent of what environmentalists like to call a species-threatening climate change—ice age, cumulative global warming.” She cleared her throat. “The concept of a viral superstrain with the rapid spread capability of influenza and the pathogenic potential of Ebola—especially one evolving from an already established pandemic like HIV-AIDS.”

Vincent nodded. “Only it’s no longer a concept. And don’t dismiss the so-called peripheral literature. The world’s new challenges will only be overcome by unconventional thinking.” He addressed her incredulity, by revealing the secret of HIV, the collective attempt by government and medical NGOs to suppress the truth. “Two years ago, with Sloane-Wright’s help, I managed to get an audience with Sarty and a panel of high-ranking NIH people. I told them I’d discovered their secret. Sarty and his cohorts were afraid enough to agree to reconsider my paper. Thankfully there were those in high office that didn’t share Sarty’s bias. Someone brought it to the attention of

the president, who took an unusual interest in it. Next thing I know my ‘therapy’ is being fast-tracked to the clinical stage— ”

Vincent paused. She was staring at him—seemingly taken aback by his revelations—with a curious mixture of bemusement and surprise.

It was the look conventional scientists gave to dissidents, mavericks— something he’d learned to deal with. He returned her look with conviction, smiling even. There was so much more, he thought— about the contingency plans for what the Health Department and even Homeland Security was calling “the apocalypse scenario”, like disguised quarantine zones within major hospitals (major biohazard threats were always a priority concern for terrorism). But he didn’t think she was ready for the whole truth.

“During my year in Africa, I witnessed these cases, saw the tests. In certain remote areas entire villages had been wiped out in one fell swoop. In the aftermath, WHO experts were tabling reports about chimera-like viruses, unable to tell what had done the damage, Ebola, or HIV. ”

Susan frowned. “But this was- what- two, three years ago. By now we’d have been in the grip of it, air travel and all.”

“Believe me, we’re there. Only you don’t know it yet— at least not the way it’s really happening.”

“I watch TV, I read the papers. I run an AIDS clinic.”

“Bear with me,” he said. “As expected, the initial, crude mutants in Africa were so virulent, their modes of spread so rapid that— ”

“They ran out of hosts. Self-limiting?”

Vincent nodded. “The classic case. Same reason why we haven’t had something like Ebola virus entering and devastating the local population here— ”

“But you said the HIV superstrain’s here, locally.”

"Because of burnout, the first superstrain emergence, the first wave self-limited. However with our retrovirus—"

"Dormancy then reemergence."

"Exactly. The first wave burnout stalled the spread. In Africa the newer strains have only recently begun surfacing in the urban clinics. Simulated projection models predict an explosive medical crisis within a year in South Africa. For the US, a year after that, by which time SW500 and other "piggy-back" therapies might avert a crisis."

"You're saying we don't have that much time?"

"Yeah. For some reason, the east coast is bucking the predicted trend, with New York, the local epicenter."

"How do you know all this?"

Vincent smiled. "You'll see. Presently I'll show you a map— the nodal points where the new strains have begun establishing themselves." Vincent took a deep breath. "The terrifying fact is that those crude initial strains of the retrovirus have retained all the characteristics of the established strains— dormancy in nerve ganglions, the ability to remain in the host for lengthy periods in carrier mode, etc. Imagine a strain with the virulence of Ebola, the long term infection and carrier status of HIV spreading through the populace like an influenza epidemic . . . "

Susan's eyes grew solemn as it dawned on her that her own conventional ideas had kept her ignorant. She thought about the new "spacesuit" regulations. She recalled the increasing numbers of children dying of full-blown AIDS, the teenagers— "The Biosafety Wards," she thought aloud. "Yes, Vincent. Over the last several months, I've been seeing increasing numbers of victims who don't fit the profile of those susceptible to the virus. In most of these cases the positive results for HIV have come back with a query. Hospital directive is that all cases with queries be referred to the senior

physicians like Dr Poole or Professor Bentley for further screening. Inevitably they've ended up in the Biosafety Wards where— ”

Vincent nodded. “Where your new unexplained AIDS cases are kept. Where there's limited public access. I was a part of that decision, two years ago, when I struck the deal with Sarty and Co. All the major centers have had to plan for a “secret” location within their hospitals— a Biosafety Zone to handle the expected new cases. Thankfully, currently only isolated cases, but a definite increase all along the east coast in incidence of the disease.”

Susan frowned, shook her head.

“What?”

“It still doesn't make sense. You can keep information like this from the general population, but from specialists . . . like me?”

“These directives come from the highest echelons. It's not just about preventing mass hysteria. The greater issue is political, economic and, of course, terror. A national crisis threatening the population is akin to a devastating war affecting stock markets, trade, tourism. We hide our worst weakness to preserve the illusion of strength.”

“Like the Chinese government and SARS.”

“Exactly. They kept their physicians out of the loop hoping a solution could be found before full public revelation. Similar to why we haven't been getting news of the explosive incidences of infections in Africa. All we need is a cure to get us home free.”

Vincent took a deep breath and sat forward on his seat. “It's called ‘organized conspiracy’— to suppress issues that are a threat to national security. There's a plan to target every institution— hospitals, clinics, laboratories— in the country and work with directors there to ensure that the new cases become notifiable to the CDC for data collection. Also, only certain members of the hierarchy are supposed to be informed of

the new cases. It's why your lab returned the tests to you with a query."

Susan was shaking her head. "Still, it just seems—"

"Be patient. You'll be a believer before I'm done showing you more."

"It's not that. It just occurred to me that you said *insect* vectors for HIV, earlier. I mean, it's common for lay people to think that just because contaminated needles can spread the virus, and because malaria and a host of other diseases are transmitted by mosquitoes, HIV can also be transmitted that way. As scientists we know better. HIV deteriorates in the gut of the female mosquito—where the journey ends. That theory has been comprehensibly disproved."

Vincent looked at her like a weary professor. "The name *Stomoxys calcitrans* ring a bell?"

Susan thought for a moment. "The stable fly? But—"

"The Max Planck Institute?"

"Oh God yes, of course. German scientis—"

"As earlier as Y2K, it had already been discovered, Susan. We know *Stomoxys c.* stores drawn blood from its host in a pouch isolated from viral deactivating digestive fluids. They proved that the stable fly transmitted viruses among horses, then stable hands, etc. Regarding mosquitoes the principle of isolated stored blood has recently been postulated."

"Not in the mainstream literature?"

"You got that right. African studies— claimed to be the work of dissidents and maverick researchers— have shown mostly three things: Several subtypes of HIV have developed the ability to manufacture a dual lipid bilayer envelope— twice as thick as a normal or double jacket. I've seen electron micrographs on the WHO and CDC files. Sufficient concentrations of these variants survive in the gut, and are then transported to

the insect's salivary glands from where they pass into another human host when mosquito saliva is injected during a bite. Some workers have found another frightening phenomenon. Viruses destroyed in the insect gut are survived by their genetic building blocks in certain instances. These genetic segments regenerate into whole viral particles after being injected via insect saliva into the new host. Thirdly— ”

Susan interjected: “The isolating storage sack?”

Vincent nodded. “And these are only the vectors we know of.”

“But there are studies that refute such hypotheses, Vincent.”

“Of course there are. There'd be wholesale panic if that kind of thinking filtered unchallenged into the public domain.” He held up a hand. “As you said, that's beside the point. It's happening. I've seen the secret files calling to suppress these facts. For now, you want to know how genuine SW500 is. How do I answer that?” He paused. “A million things have gone before and nearly everything has failed or is failing. SW500 is pioneering work— and I don't mean that in a self-adulatory sense. I mean early, crude, the first unconventional approach. Perhaps not as refined as stuff that might hit the world years from now, but this is the best we've got. Our best hope. Think of my work as the first computer used for simple math compared to what we have today.”

Vincent suddenly smiled, his eyes twinkling as though he'd gotten into his stride. “I've gone to far greater lengths than any before on the planet to test and prove that hypothesis. When you see my e-virus, e-cells, organs, humans, you'll have some indication of how far we'd journeyed with this. SW500 is both prevention and cure. And this may come as a shock to you but, there *were* human experiments. Real humans infected with HIV. We termed these the “Overnight Trials”. That means— ”

“Ultra short term toxicity trials, lasting hours, days,” she said “The latest protocols for major outbreaks, bioterror, chemical warfare— special circumstances.”

Vincent raised an eyebrow. "I'm impressed. I thought only government medical agencies knew about these."

"My late husband was a politician, or fast becoming one. He had access to things in the Commonwealth."

"Anyway, that's how we set effective target dosages for the different phases of the syndrome. Time was, and is, of the essence. So we received special permission to treat a target group of human subjects direct from drawing board and the manufacturing process. We used vegetative state donor bodies in classified pilot experiments. The use of these human subjects was classified— a kind of pilot experiment, which the Senate Health Committee had been very much interested in . . ."

WHEN VINCENT FINISHED, Susan handed him the files, all of Leland's stash, except the Flash. She couldn't bring herself to do that. Not after the last few days. She might be impressed by his openness and humility but she wasn't going to expose herself again.

To her amazement, Vincent needed barely fifteen minutes to decipher the material before reaching the conclusions she had reached after several hours.

"This has personal implications," he said. "I have a brother, Christian, eight years my junior. He has, or *had* AIDS." Vincent told her about his parents. "Christian acquired the infection at birth, despite everything the doctors had done to prevent mother-to-child transmission when he was born. Two years ago, I nearly lost him. His immune system was all but decimated. I've been treating him with SW500— administering the therapy, running regular tests. His progress has been remarkable." Vincent winced. "Dammit, so much so that I've become complacent, haven't done a single follow-up in the last four months. I'd just taken it for granted. "He's away at Harvard where a private nurse in my employ administers the therapy. She doesn't know

what it is. She takes his bloods once a month, couriers the vials to me. I've just let them pile up in refrigeration, untouched . . .”

Vincent stopped talking. Looked toward his window where a couple of birds-falcons, he thought- took flight from the short ledge beyond the glass. He turned to his computer, pensive, undecided about something. He checked through the onscreen data before revisiting some of the files. Then he stood, gazed down at her for a while, almost as though he were scanning her brain, reading her thoughts.

She shifted in her seat, about to ask him what, when he clenched his teeth and nodded. A decision appeared to have been made.

“Well a ton of work lies ahead, Susan . . . And, of course, we've got to make sure you weren't followed, that you're safe.” He held out his hand to her. “Come. There's a secret place only Chris and I know about. I'd like to take you there, now.”

43

IT WAS A VOYAGE of discovery. From her illusory mishap in his foyer, to the surprise of his age. As she moved deeper into his penthouse, she marveled at it all. Lining the corridors were virtual paintings on thin-film media so versatile “I could bend them into a cylinder and they’d retain the perfect image”. Walls that were blue earlier were pale green now—or fuchsia, or the blazing hues of sunset— “light-sensitive wall-coatings embedded with nanotech diodes linked to autochromic processors,” he explained.

“Wow. All of this must’ve cost a fortune,” she said. Quickly adding, “I mean it’s amazing what you’ve done with this place. You’d never say from the street.”

“Sloane-Wright was generous. And I was fortunate— a young man with all that money to indulge my fantasies. It was just cosmic, you know. And keeping all this discreet, hidden from the world wasn’t that difficult, especially with all the construction in the East Village. I’d been offered this place— which was actually one of three apartments on the top floor— at a giveaway. Within a year I took over the other apartments, one by one, and converted them into my penthouse. ”

As they reached the end of a corridor to the left of the entrance, Vincent pressed a hidden switch. A part of the wall slid open to reveal a life-sized mural of Albert Einstein, arms outstretched against a stormy sky. Vincent pressed another switch and a doorway opened before them.

“Welcome to my secret chamber,” he said.

She followed him into a cavernous space. Computer workstations in twin rows ran half the floor length. Banks of flat panel monitors glowed amidst consoles dotted with tiny red and green flickering diodes and oscillating electronic displays. It was a

techno orgy of gadgets and gizmos, married via leviathan cabling to shelves of beakers, pipettes, burettes—which in turn were connected to more electronic terminals and displays alive with running digital readouts. She also noticed a familiar sight. Stacked in neat rows on steel floor-to-ceiling shelving were computer towers, fans whirring from their back ends. She recognized the supercomputer arrangement. They'd used a similar Beowulf cluster in the Harvard lab, only— she thought with a thrill of amazement— it'd been barely a fifth the size of the one she was gawking at.

“Wow. Houston Control . . . Cosmic?” She smiled.

He laughed boyishly. “Yeah, cosmic. You got that right.”

She did a slow pirouette.

“What *is* this place, Vincent? You subcontracting for NASA?”

“My humble office and lab. My factory of ideas. My . . . Fortress of Solitude, if you will. And yeah, I guess I could launch spacecraft from here too, only the city would never grant the permit. As it stands, this get up is hardly legal. It's the reason for my location.” He gestured out one of the large windows, to the surrounding low rises. “The reason for my camouflage.” He smiled, the dimple in his chin deepening. His eyes crinkled, lit up with a childlike glow.

Her gaze floated about, settling on oddities, unusual arrangements of equipment that challenged her curiosity. The place hummed with the urgency of enterprise, artificial intelligence at work.

She sensed an air of extreme wealth here and yet the place was pervaded by a youthful innocence and charm that reminded her of Nate. How he would've loved to be in a place like this. It set off a rush of emotion that she fought back, aware how strong she had to be for what lay ahead.

This was an unexpected gift. Vincent appeared to be a man of wealth, means and

compassion who could help her, she thought. Sure, the implications of her presence here could be dangerous for him. But she allayed her twinges of guilt by reminding herself she had no other option. And there was something bigger at stake here.

Leading her to a workstation facing one of the windows, he took a seat beside her and turned with a knowing smile.

“You didn’t tell me everything did you, Susan?”

She winced inwardly. *How on earth did he know about Leland’s Flash?* But kept a straight face. “Excuse me?”

“The X subjects, PX3, P-WH. The stuff about the White House. Bentley’s DC schedule. It’s what makes everything so dramatic for you doesn’t it? It’s why you’re laying so much on the line, the deadly risks . . . Is PX3 who I think it is?”

“Hard to believe, but it’s all there in the files.”

“Well, frankly, I’m not surprised. It was no secret that her late husband, the senator, was a shameless philanderer. He’d probably slept with every nubile female intern that ever set foot in his office. From what I know already, nothing surprises me about this disease. If anything, the White House involvement highlights the syndrome’s immensity and proves the ubiquitous terrifying nature of it.” His expression turned grave. He folded his arms, his toned biceps stretching the cloth of his T-shirt. She thought she felt the air conditioner blow colder through the room.

“This plague’s pervading all routes now, seeping through cracks both physical and mental. It’s unhindered by borders like social class, or economic status, unshackled by its early limitations of spread. On a human level, it’s presence in the White House would do the greatest good for the cause of sufferers. Politically, well, it’s pioneering territory. Given current attitudes and the fact she’s our first female president, there could be scandal and ruin. It’s a grave secret for the Oval Office considering the stigma

attached to a disease still thought of merely as a sexually-transmitted one.” Vincent swiveled around and reached for the files he’d laid on the worktop. “What *does* seem odd to me though, is the inclusion of that name on the hit list. With that kind of secret, the president is politically assassinated already, so why bother. Besides, she isn’t even really on the official list of subjects. Her status has no bearing on the result.”

Susan’s eyes grew intense. “So much about this affair confuses me, Vincent. But there’s great evil at work here that we just can’t allow to prevail.”

HE CONSIDERED THIS, his mind flashing back to Styles. Her words rung true from his knowledge of the man. And for the first time since she’d stepped into his apartment, Vincent realized just how big the thing she’d brought to his door was. Now it was his turn to marvel at her courage. Christ, what she must have gone through in the last twenty-four hours, he thought.

Studying her now, the hunted eyes, the faintly trembling lips, the expression of fear that’d drew the thin veil of shadows across her face, he found himself maddeningly attracted to her. What *will*, what deep compassion she must’ve had to have embarked on something intimidating as this. She was a guppy to Style’s Pike, he thought. The scientist in him was set aside for a few moments as the man within him compared her to his own friends. His young girlfriends were so one-dimensional compared to this uncommon woman who’d rocked up out of the blue, asking for his help.

He’d barely known her an hour and was smitten. He relived flashes of their initial moments: her ripped sweater, ivory skin, the pale swell of her breasts, her eyes sparkling with fear and fury when she’d thought he was the enemy . . .

Susan shifted in her seat. “So, what now? About the therapy, I mean . . .”

He blinked. “Yeah, the therapy,” he said, and began tapping on his keyboard.

After a while the keying became faster. She saw a succession of Web pages flash on his screen. Eventually, he typed gibberish-looking commands, that vaguely resembled Unix. "Just warming up the system," he said. "Won't be long before I can check on my SW500 database regarding Christian's treatment."

Above the muted staccato of his fingers, Vincent gave her more insights into his life, about his parents, his mother's wish. "And your news about SW500 . . . It's devastating. But I'm convinced the therapy is still good."

"How so?"

He clasped his hands behind his neck and leaned back. "Months before the deal with the FDA, I got batches of the drugs from Styles, as agreed. Chris was in a bad way at the time. None of the cocktails was working anymore and we'd resigned ourselves to the inevitable. But I started him on SW500. I began treating a few 'friends' too, sufferers whom I'd met during Chris's frequent visits to the hospital. They eventually became my first experimental subjects, my own human trials as it were—"

"You tried SW500 on human subjects before trials, *before* FDA approval?" She was incredulous. "Good God, that's criminal."

"It's not quite that simple. Anyway, they're all still fine, perfectly fine."

"How could you be certain, when you admitted being lax with monitoring Chris. It's the reason we have protocols, controls, in place."

"Christ. Did I just confess a secret that could cost me my license, get me sent to prison?" He took a deep breath. "Still, none of that terrifies me more than the thought of losing Christian. He's the only family I have left, you know."

Susan said nothing. Vincent hunched over his keyboard then glanced at a security monitor with multiple views. Whispering clipped commands, he zoomed in, out, panned across the busy street. "Keep an eye on these, Susan. I need to make certain

you weren't followed."

She reached out to him. "Thanks for the trust. Your secret's safe with me. I promise." After a pensive moment, she said, "I'm scared, Vincent. I feel we're running out of time. The patients with asterisks are dead. And who knows when the next numbers come up. This girl . . . Laura, is only fourteen. These people have suffered so much, and they're being sacrificed like guinea pigs. I can't let more innocents die. With the trials ending soon these tainted patients will be next. Right now they could be after Laura, trying to kill her. You've got to help me figure a way to end this."

"As a scientist, sure. There're batches of drugs in refrigerated storage including originals from way back. Finding proof from these and Leland's files will help exonerate you. I can do everything to keep you safe until then. Apart from that . . . On account of your fugitive status, the authorities are out. So I guess we've got to lawyer up and take things from there."

"No time for that now. And I can't trust anyone, least of all a lawyer. They may come up against judges, DA's that could so easily be influenced by Sloane-Wright." She told him about the FBI, about Fielding. "There are people out there being murdered by their protectors. They'll stop at nothing. I turned to you on a hunch, without knowing, but that's about as much of a risk. . ." She trailed off.

He squeezed her hand. "You can stay here as long as you like."

"But I can't hide here forever. In the little time we have, if you could figure things out for me, we could save so many lives." Smiling guiltily, she took the flash from the backpack and handed it to him. "It's Dr Harvey Leland's. Sorry I held out till now, but I had to be sure of you."

44

AFTER ALMOST HAVING the woman doctor in his clutches, then losing her around Fifth Avenue, the big man with the pocked face backtracked to the hotel. Using his bogus NYPD badge to keep hotel security at bay, he searched the room whose door he'd blasted right off its hinges. "This is a fucking crime scene," he'd growled in their faces. "Don't even take a half-assed peek until forensics gets here, y'hear me?"

OUTSIDE THE HOTEL, two men sat in a dark blue unmarked Buick sedan. They wore dark suits, dark standard-issue shades, and equally dark expressions on their faces. Under the SAC's unofficial orders, they'd arrived minutes earlier for the doctor. But minutes too late—according to the mousy clerk at the desk, who'd stared at their FBI creds: "A cop's been here already, asking for her." Which shouldn't have happened—considering they'd taken NYPD off the case. So they'd called the SAC, who called back presently, clearing the NYPD. And while the clerk at the desk had been graphically filling in the gaps in their picture, the 'cop' had returned.

So they watched him now, their UNSUB with the face, as he left the hotel and got into a Ford— which, not being the ubiquitous Caprice, only confirmed he wasn't a cop. The Ford immediately sped away from the curb with the Buick maintaining the customary one-car distance behind.

SEATED BESIDE VINCENT, Susan's expression was a mixture of surprise and curious admiration. Occasionally she flinched as though he were working with something that sent a flurry of sparks all around them. In fact, he was keyboarding, his fingers moving

furiously over keys in a violent rat-a-tat, opening and closing files in rapid succession, absorbing whole pages of material in less time than she could decipher initial lines of text, symbols. During his rare pauses, she noticed the calluses on his fingers, the commitment of his gaze to the monitor. He appeared to withdraw from the room, slipping into a bizarre zone as the raft of text files was wolfed down by his brain.

When he broke away and faced her, he looked drawn, haggard. "It's worse than anything I expected. The Flash holds the complete database of the trials. I guess Leland wasn't able to Xerox everything, so he opted for digital copy. Confirms everything we gleaned from the hard copy. SW500 turns renegade around the tenth month. Also confirms something I've doubted so far—President Madison *is* ill and on that hit list."

She began to speak, but Vincent went on, "Active genetic components of SW500 were incorporating into subject DNA. They were replacing nucleic acid sequences during the pre-mitotic phase, embedding the potential for mutations in cells—the potential for cancers. The cure has become worse than the disease!" He was visibly shaken. "Christ. Instead of preserving life I've endangered it irreparably."

"Maybe not. It's possible none of it has become irreversible yet."

"But worsening every minute." He ran fingers through his hair. "As you said, time's running out. I need to locate the glitch—its originating sequence and trigger."

Vincent kept his eyes on the monitor. *What other secrets have you hidden in there, Dr Leland?* He felt a pang of guilt for not telling her everything. A portion of Leland's drive remained locked behind passcodes and encryption. He turned to her.

"Why don't you take a break, Susan, some alone time, while I try to figure things out."

45

THE TOWEL HUGGED her body, accentuated her bare shoulders, long neck, revealed the athlete in her: the toned muscles of her arms, the taut swell of her thighs and calves. Her posture though, showed dejection. Above the cold tiles, hair dripping, head bowed without vigor, her eyes were sunken, her face, lucent from the steam, pale and gaunt.

In the shower lulled by the heat, the pounding rhythm and drone of water, she'd begun thinking of her family again. Of Nate. Wondering if he'd be alive today if she hadn't screamed that night. Or, if she'd acted sooner to stop the monster who'd invaded their home. Or if she'd been another person altogether, not cursed with tragedy.

Would things have been different—would he have had a chance at life?

Nate. Her baby. How long had it been since she'd seen him, smelled him, felt his warm body in her arms. She clutched at her throat, struggled to breathe. That's what happened when they attacked like that—unbidden memories out of the haze, sharp-beaked, swooping down to cut into her, reminding her she would never see him again, never experience what he'd grow up to be like.

She stared into the bathroom mirror, loathing her weak self, ruing the fact she'd survived. She hated her rescuers at the sanitarium when, emboldened by madness and despair, she could have done the right thing. She grimaced at herself, disgusted she didn't now have the courage to end her life.

"Oh dear Lord," she cried, pressing the loose end of the towel against her mouth, biting against tears. "This is wrong, so wrong. How could you let me live, when I allowed my child to die?"

She leaned forward, biting her tongue, banging her head against the glass then

gasped as her craving stirred, cramps doubling her over, making her hands tremble, her teeth chatter. They were becoming like seizures now. Pressing her fists deep into her belly to quell the pain, she staggered out, began to dress with clothing from the guestroom Vincent had directed her to.

She wiped her tears and the blood from her mouth. Rallied against the thoughts of death and futility. There were reasons for survival she knew. Atonement was one. Losing her own child had triggered her near pathological compassion for young patients, those who had no chance. It was why she cared for Tyrone and Laura; why she had to prevail for victims everywhere, why her own life meant nothing. And why—her hands began shaking again—her life *was* nothing.

She stiffened, clasped her hands together, mustering the will to endure, even if for a moment. And the bout passed. But the respite from her many demons would be all too brief, she knew.

In the transient calm, she turned her attention to Vincent, this room with its amazing collection: A variety of robes, unisex sweat pants, tops, designer T-shirts. He'd asked if she wanted him to send out for anything— he ordered everything online. That way he never wasted a minute of 'brain cell time' and rarely had to leave his Fortress of Solitude. She'd declined. Having already put him out so much she couldn't ask for more. She needed shoes, but the Nikes could still do. And anything else— his collection would certainly provide far more than her immediate needs.

And what Vincent had in his guest room was, well . . . cosmic, to use his word. Drawers and cupboards overflowed with women's perfumes and cosmetics— DKNY, Yves St Laurent, Chanel, Estee Lauder, boxed tubs of Creme De La Mer— at \$300 dollars a knock. There were unopened packages of women's underwear, lingerie— Calvin Klein, Victoria's Secret, La Perla— catalyzing thoughts about Vincent's love life.

This stash was strange for a guy who, despite his good looks and muscular build, was a camera-shy loner. She wondered about the girls that evidently visited here. Why else all this? She felt a twinge of something—jealousy?—for the man who, in the first fifteen minutes after their meeting, had become her knight in shining armor.

She dwelled on that. How perfect he appeared, in every way: Brilliant. Young. At four years her junior, perhaps too young. An “old” widow like her couldn’t possibly present a glamorous prospect for any young, wealthy single man. Still, he made her feel safe. For a soft-spoken, calm and unhurried guy, the strength and self-confidence he projected awed her. All his power lay in his brain. His tools, the computers, were like an army of robots, all amassed in the domain of his lab, and becoming extensions of his limbs—his brain—at will. For now, at this very moment, at least, everything he was appeared to be all she needed.

As she left the guest room, hunger pangs gnawed, but they weren’t as unbearable as her resurgent need for meds. Earlier, too hyped to eat, she’d hardly touched the snacks. Now even as she gravitated to the medicine cupboard, she resisted the urge, afraid Vincent might discover the missing amounts. No bets on how long she could hold out she thought. God knows she’d tried countless times since coming to New York and taking the new position. Each attempt worse than the one before. The uncontrollable nausea, tremors and spasms, more intense with each effort. Even that she could bear. *But, God, not the concomitant hallucinations, the paranoia.* They made her life a precarious unpredictable thing.

Reaching for the bottle of Vicodin, she dropped the pills on her palm, sniffed them then replaced them. *How many minutes before I submit to their thrall?*

From a walk-in refrigerator brimming with catered meals, she selected a chicken sandwich. Wow. Every corner of Vincent’s place reeked of phenomenal wealth. The

kitchen's exotic wood, gilt inlays, appliances. The opulent bedrooms, paintings, Indian relics and sculptures— like something out of a high end home decor magazine. The apartment appeared to have been decorated with an eclectic hand, the mix of real and digitized paintings, antiques and modern furniture, Ming vases and post-modern works. A disarming chaos of art, as though purposely casual. Yet the effect was enriching and pleasing— ultimately princely. *It must have cost a fortune of a fortune.*

It dawned on her that she didn't know what Vincent did for a living. He was a scientist but where did he get the money to live like this? The payout he'd received from Sloane-Wright, according to the article in the library, would barely cover the six-bedrooms in his place. Even trebled, that figure wouldn't approach this collection. Robert had dragged her off to enough exhibitions and auctions as a voyeur for her to know. Her intuition bristled like a cat.

Soda and sandwich in hand, she approached a granite counter when something on the security monitors made her feel ill. Images of the street. People moved in and out of the pictures, cars floated by. But one familiar figure remained, staring at Vincent's building. It set her heart hammering. She gasped. Dropped the sandwich and glass which crashed on the marble floor. Her body twisted under her clothes, her lips curled, as if she were about to cry. "Oh, no," she moaned.

It was the man from outside the library, close to the lions, against the background of the busy street, Nat Sherman Tobacconist across the corner. The man at the hotel this morning. How did he follow her here? *How could he have known?*

46

IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE for him to have known she was coming here. That decision had been made on the fly. *If he'd followed me here, he would've pounced before I entered the building. So how come he'd only appeared now? And . . . what in hell is this—* The images on the monitors zoomed in and out, different views. She pictured Vincent in the lab, at the controls. She shuddered, began clawing herself as her skin crawled, the tremors and itching making her crazy. Doubling up, she dry-heaved several times as the heat rose to her face.

She dragged herself to his mini drugstore, grabbed a handful of pills and stuffed them into her mouth. Now she understood how he could afford to live like a king. His place with its cameras everywhere reminded her of the CRU. *Why would someone live like this, watching everything, watching their back, just like Bentley and Co?*

She ran out to the corridor, wringing her hands. In the foyer she stopped, stared at Vincent coming up from the direction of the lab.

"Hey . . . Susan?"

"Hey," she whispered, her focus birdlike, flitting from him to the elevator door.

"You okay? I was just coming to check on you. Saw this guy on the cams acting kinda suspicious across the street. Fits the description of your assailant at the hotel . . ." Vincent frowned. "Hey, you're shaking . . ."

She pressed a hand against her mouth, suppressing sobs.

"Guess you saw him too, huh." He rushed over and took her in his arms. Held her for a time, rocking her gently, rubbing her back, murmuring reassurance.

Her hysteria dissipated. She sighed, pressed tightly against him, comforted by a

man for the first time in two years. Somehow these last weeks of worry, the last twenty-four hours of terror and exhaustion lightened. After a time, when her breathing calmed and the reality of her situation intervened once again, she gently pulled away.

BACK IN THE LAB she became quieter, indrawn, lulled into a kind of stupor. Where moments ago there'd been hope and security there was now only futility.

In contrast, Vincent was energized. He ran a password decrypt program for Leland's secrets, resumed analyzing the data, and checked the security monitors.

After a long silence, she shook her head. "With enemies this omniscient, how can we ever succeed, Vincent?"

"Well, maybe if we thought of this as just a game instead of letting fear dominate. Truth is, this *is* a game and right now the game has just begun in earnest."

Her eyes flashed. "Good God, how could you even think this is a game?"

"Everything's a game, Susan. Some games are more serious than others, some more enjoyable, some more dangerous . . . That's all. It's all about making the play. Right now this guy out there, he's waiting to make his. The point is to figure a strategy to outwit the enemy, like chess, sport . . . like the game of death."

Vincent brought up visuals on a large screen overhead. The gray Ford, the stout, balding driver. He pointed to Pockmark. "They're partners. This guy was at the lobby studying tenant names a while ago. They obviously followed you."

"I don't see how . . . unless—" She recalled the slip of paper with Vincent's address, checked her backpack and came up empty. "I must've dropped it in my haste to leave. I'm so sorry to have brought you this danger, Vincent. What'll we do now?"

"Get rid of them, I guess. Remember the game? It's time to play." His tap-dancing fingers brought up the logo for the Department of Motor Vehicles onscreen.

“Vehicle belongs to ProSecure.” A succession of windows followed. “A ‘subsidiary’ of a subsidiary of Sloane-Wright.” Next he entered the NYPD site. Using an online cache of codes, he cracked into restricted areas. He posted the vehicle’s reg. number on a stolen vehicle listing, made it retrospectively active and typed a priority APB request.

“Okey-doke. Now let’s get back to work.”

“But . . . What about those goons?”

“As of now they’re driving a stolen vehicle that was used in an armed robbery. The cops have a positive location. NYPD reaction time is impressive, even here in the East Village. Trust me, Susan, you’ll be all right. In the meantime . . .”

Resuming his hacking routine Vincent entered the secret CDC site and opened a map of the Continental US. He indicated a cluster of red dots around Manhattan. “New superstrain cases seem to be focused here: Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens.”

Susan read the captions and frowned. “The primary phase. It’s . . . well, it’s almost as though we have a single host and its contacts—”

“That’s what the CDC thinks. There’s a team trying to track “Patient Zero” then trace all contacts before the primary phase reaches critical mass and a true epidemic.” He highlighted an information box for her.

“Nearly five hundred reported cases already! For silent carriers, add thirty percent.” Her eyes widened at the figures, the green of her irises catching the luminescence of the screen. “Prognosis and projections, Vincent?”

“With SW500, no problem. Crisis solved inside a year. Which is why there’s no sense of urgency, and why the veil of secrecy is still intact. It won’t be long before the press gets wind of this, though. Especially if this turmoil in the trials boils over.”

Susan swallowed. “And . . . without the therapy?”

“Once we reach critical mass— what the CDC call apocalypse threshold—

infections go exponential. You know the drill. 500 cases, then 1000, 2000, 4000 . . . The syndrome's initially invisible. Hospitals won't be teeming until victims go full-blown. That's when Manhattan turns into a medieval quagmire of disease."

Susan opened her mouth to speak but Vincent anticipated her question. "A year tops," he said. "If SW500 rolls out in four, five months as expected, it would give us enough time to curb the tide."

Her cheeks were flushed. "Then you have to fix SW500, Vincent."

"*Fix* it. Christ, whatever I might've said earlier, I didn't really believe it's flawed. Before production I must've run the simulations a trillion times, allowing the multiple processors to automatically duplicate every aspect of the process."

"You couldn't have predicted every possible real-world scenario 'in-silico'."

"I could every *probable* one. My Sim programs were equipped with AI."

"Even a supercomputer's intelligence is only analogous to human intelligence. Statistically there's always a margin of error. Even intelligent humans make mistakes. With computers you run the risk of compounding the mistakes . . . exponentially."

Vincent was shaking his head. "No. I created open-ended 'learning' algorithms that acquired their momentum from every potential preceding scenario."

She relented. "Okay, alright. So, if not your therapy, then what about the virus evolving to circumvent the therapy? A simple case of acquired resistance."

"Can't happen. That's what VDP—the Virion program is for."

Despite his confidence, Susan detected a touch of incertitude in his sigh.

"When I show you what went into making this cure a reality, the actual MOA of SW500, and what's in store for the world if this fails . . . Later, in the VR cube, there—" He indicated a glass-walled cubicle at the back of the lab. "I'll take you into the insidious world of the newer strains, their ingenious capabilities for survival, the new

insect vectors. You'll actually encounter those terrifying subtypes of HIV."

"I have a Ph.D. in viral genetics, Vincent."

"Which is why you'll understand the miracle. We factored every safety device you can think of into the therapy. There's no way the virus can circumvent those."

Susan warned him about complacency, "Remember the Preston Vaccine Trials of the nineteen-nineties, Vincent? Those attenuated viruses relearned how to repair their altered genes (which had initially made them harmless) and returned to the original virulent state. Several uninfected volunteers were then unwittingly infected with HIV."

Vincent nodded. "Yeah, but SW500 doesn't depend on conventional approaches to genetic interference. A virus like HIV is simply a piece of genetic code. Or, in computer terms, a simple software code running a program. Its sole function is self-perpetuation. The accompanying disease and death is collateral damage. Like a computer virus replicating, destroying data, corrupting files and systems."

"I know that."

"Sure, but do you know that I countered HIV the way you inactivate a computer virus. I've written an antidote (antivirus) program for HIV. It's like a virus too, a self-evolving, self-replicating one much like the digital binary of computers. Only, I've used the four bases of DNA to make up a double-binary, or quaternary, gene code to neutralize virulence. It's delivered by nanotech Microprobes, the most secure type of—"

The expression on Susan's face stopped him. "What's wrong?"

She was pointing to the security monitors, her eyes wide. "Look, Vincent, it's happening."

47

THE OCCUPANTS OF the Buick Regal parked outside Vincent's apartment gaped at what was going down in front of them. The driver adjusted his shades and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. His partner swore.

They'd followed the big man with the 'face' from the hotel to this place, had been waiting for almost an hour. Now a police cruiser stopped beside the gray Ford. Two policemen stepped out, drew their weapons and within minutes, shackled the big guy and his 'driver', bundled them into the cruiser and drove away.

Their only lead gone, the G-man at the wheel stared ahead, nonplused. "What the hell we do now?"

His partner took out his cellphone. "See if we can get a line on what NYPD's up to. In the meantime, we sit tight. Target's somewhere in that building. We just have to figure where. Or we might get lucky and she'll come to us."

SUSAN WHOOPED AND hugged Vincent, kissing him on the cheek.

"Incredible. A game . . . orchestrated by your fingers on this keyboard."

"Just don't get too complacent. They'll eventually straighten things out, and could be back within hours. This is just a breather, buying us time to figure our next move. Before that, however . . ." Vincent held her firmly by the shoulders. "You, my girl, need to get some grub into you. Hopefully, you won't be disturbed this time."

Susan shut her eyes and sighed. He was right. This was just a temporary respite. Bentley and Sloane-Wright were too powerful to be discouraged by a small hiccup such as this. When she opened her eyes he was smiling, still looking at her, his gaze dreamy.

"What am I going to do with you Susan Conner? These guys look pretty determined and now they know where you are. I'm going to have to find another place to keep you. And soon. "

She didn't reply. Instead reflected on her situation. From the moment she'd stepped into Vincent's penthouse, his world of fantasy had resurrected her bewilderment of what was really happening to her. His words now began to cut the last shreds of disbelief still tethered to her mind. She remembered things beyond her own predicament. It wasn't only her life that was in danger.

"I know," she said. "But it's not only me I'm worried about. There's Laura, and who knows how many new targets on Bentley's updated list, Vincent. And-- " She hesitated. "The president's in danger, too. And she's the only one that can really set this straight. I . . . We have to *do* something . . . alert the White House, somehow. I think that's our only real chance of beating the odds."

Vincent raked his fingers through his hair and sat up. He was thinking about Leland's DVD. *For the President's Eyes Only*. Rather dramatic, was his first impression. He looked at her. "What do you have in mind?"

"I- I don't know. It's just that . . . I mean, all I keep thinking is, those in danger have to be warned, helped. What's the use of all this if I don't act on what I know?"

"If your suspicions are correct, they're eliminating patients *within* reach. I can't see how the president's progress has any bearing on the result-- if indeed what Leland had suggested is true in the first place." Vincent leaned closer to her, softening his tone. "Look, I know you're in a state. I know this is bad. But let's not get carried away."

She stiffened at his patronizing tone and glared at him. "Carried away?"

Vincent was bemused. "Surely you're not serious about the president?"

"On the contrary. The president isn't untouchable when tens of billions of

dollars are at stake. American presidents have been assassinated for less. The company needs to have an acceptable outcome for FDA approval. It would be devastating for them if the president discovered the therapy wasn't working. The decision to have her treated would've involved a high-level arrangement—close advisers, high-ranking medical officers. They'd all know her result. Then the FDA would know. The president has to be Sloane-Wright's highest priority. It certainly gives them motive.”

“You're forgetting one small fact. President Madison's keeping this a secret. Last time I checked, there was no disclosure on her part. And you know our leader has a legal responsibility to share her medical records with the public.”

“Like hell,” Susan's eyes flashed, “Last I heard, the president had a right to medical privacy like anyone else. With the world in such a dangerous place right now, with the imminent threat of a world war, President Madison isn't about to plunge the US into a major political crisis. Have you considered that?”

Vincent nodded. “Okay. Valid point. I give you that. It would also precipitate an economic catastrophe. And I guess if the president's position became compromised or if she were assassinated, then—”

“That would most certainly ensure an apocalypse. As world attention is diverted, the HIV superstrain will be rampant.”

Vincent turned to the windows as he focused on a distant memory.

His first meeting with Styles.

In the darkness of that limo, wrestling with his conscience, he knew his life had taken a new direction the moment the good guys had turned him down. A decision had been made about his life because he'd had no options. And ever since that night it'd felt as though he was holding his breath, just wondering when his dark alliance with Styles would bear fruit, spawn the monster.

And here it was.

Yeah, the worst was always the hardest to believe, but sometimes, it was best to believe the worst. That way you're prepared.

Turning to her, he studied her eyes, the blue-green sea that churned with emotion. The NYPD were after her, Sloane-Wright's goons, too. Her image as a fugitive from justice had flashed on national television. What would it hurt to have faith in her hunches? The bad guys would never be stalking her otherwise.

"I guess you have something there worth going along with, Susan," he eventually said.

48

SEARCHING FOR HIS therapy's glitch through the colossal files in cyberspace presented little problem for Vincent. It was safe, familiar territory. Comforting, in fact, as his brain absorbed the streams of data. What troubled him, kept him shifting in his seat, was the real world scenario— the problem presented by his new friend's peril.

Earlier, he'd put on a brave front for Susan, but the issue of her safety consumed him. She was the cliché of his mother's old novels—a rare bird with damaged wings helplessly flown in through his window. Still they were real, these strange, newfound feelings he had for her. He felt the intense need to nurture her back to health.

He knew how dangerous it was to keep her here, yet he couldn't bear the thought of sending her away. Maybe just tonight, he thought, looking at her.

She felt his eyes and turned. "What?"

He coughed. "Two things. First, Leland's Flash. What we discussed earlier was only part of the data he had on it."

"Come again?"

"The rest is password protected and encrypted. Didn't mean to keep it from you. Just that I'm still trying to crack it. He used some really advanced systems."

"Leland was quite the computer pro. He designed several models for minor trials we ran at Aaron Diamond. Question is, why'd he need that level of secrecy?"

"Maybe to ensure only those at the highest level could access it."

"How long will it take you?"

"Give or take a couple of hours more."

"And the second thing?"

“Yeah. That. I was thinking . . . We’d have to move you, soon.”

Worry crept into her eyes. “Maybe a hotel close by, under an assumed name?”

Vincent shook his head. “More like out of New York. As I said, it’s just a matter of time before those goons come sniffing around here again.”

She eyed the monitors. “Wouldn’t he have already called Sloane-Wright?”

“Yeah, but since no one’s come, I’m thinking he doesn’t want Styles to know he’s failed. So this’ll be his secret until he can make it right.”

“So where do I go, Vincent?”

“I’m thinking Washington, DC.”

“Why there?”

“It’s logical. The president lives there. The headquarters of the FBI are there. And I have a friend we might need who works at the White House. Well, right next door actually, in the OEOB— Old Executive Office Building— to be precise. Hymie Goldman’s a good friend of mine. He’s a junior associate in the firm run by the Counsel to the President. With local law enforcement on your tail and local FBI looking unfavorable to you, this seems the logical option.”

Susan rose and walked to the window. “I feel so safe here. I can’t imagine being out there again.” She turned to him. “If you have a friend so close to the president, maybe he can e-mail this stuff to her, or deliver it to the Oval Office personally, or whatever. I don’t know, Vincent, but you’re the cyber-expert, you have ways . . .”

“I’ve been toying with the idea. Earlier, I tried to raise Hymie. His answering service said he was away for the weekend. With you in DC, it’ll make things simpler in case he wanted to contact you. I only wish I had something concrete as proof of presidential danger to pass on to Hymie. You know, to make it sound legit.”

“Concrete, like how?”

Vincent laughed. "I don't know. Like written proof, plans. A recording of Bentley's or Styles' conversations actually plotting their evil might be nice." Vincent tilted his head. "Actually, that *would* be nice . . . Yeah, that's just what we'll do."

She gave him a bemused look. "Do what?"

"Quit working in the dark. Turn the tables on the baddies and find out what Styles and Bentley are up to. Sounds crazy, but it's a way to stay ahead of your pursuers. Since it's weekend I hope they'll keep those goons locked up till Monday. Which suits us fine, because when he returns, our big friend will want revenge for missing out on you at the hospital, at the hotel, and for today. "

"He wasn't the guy who attacked me at the hospital."

Vincent looked confused.

"The fake orderly, was shorter, slimmer, and the forehead above the mask was definitely not pocked. And he smelled of expensive perfume."

"A crook with class." Vincent smiled.

"At the police station, my mind had been blank. Now I remember he had a digit or two missing on his left hand, the one against my mouth. It had been gloved but I felt the stumps, the loose latex." A fine sheen of perspiration glistened on her brow.

Vincent leaned forward. "Well, if this was not our local goon, then it's someone they hired to do you and the nurse. A professional?"

Susan shrugged.

"Okay let's figure this: In Leland's Flash there was reference to hired killers eliminating patients. And your description of Eileen's wound—right between the eyes, execution style, the silenced gun, and—" Vincent thought about something. "There's an explosion nearby. ER goes crazy with wounded. A killer enters, does his job . . .Mmm. Too much of a coincidence, I think." He typed some commands. She saw the logo of the

FBI on his screen. He clicked on links. Typed some more. Brought up words like C4, pipe bomb, detonators.

Then she was looking into his eyes. "FBI tests on the blast site determined that the explosive and detonators were of local, commercial origin. So it could be the blast was the work of the killer to divert attention. At that point, eliminating both you and the nurse would've taken care of Sloane-Wright's problems. Important enough for them to use a Pro, like an assassin. Brains and brawn. Unlike your man at the hotel."

"So why didn't this 'Pro' come after me at the hotel?"

Vincent pondered the question. "Perhaps they had him on another assignment."

Susan too, appeared thoughtful. Then she said, "About the president's peril, Vincent, this talk of an assassin just reminded me about something. Bentley makes a weekly trip to Washington. It's no secret in the Department. He's a member of some government-appointed AIDS task team. So, it's assumed the Chief's busy with that."

"Yeah. But we know he has to be treating the president on these trips, right?"

Vincent slapped his thigh. "And that's the perfect situation for Sloane-Wright. I mean, their man meets the president personally. Your hunch is looking pretty solid now." But Vincent's smile faded almost as soon as it began, his expression morphing into a frown. "Wait a minute, doesn't that just make the assassin redundant? I mean, if Bentley's up close and personal with the president . . . then *he's* our man."

They grew quiet again, each dealing with the gap in their reasoning, the frustration of being clueless.

Susan glanced up. "How can we get more information?"

"Not without breaking the law. I'd have to do a bit of phone phreaking."

"Come again?"

"When you hack into a remote phone and use it to call up a number. Only I'm

going to try and crack into the telephone company computers to eavesdrop on Styles' and Bentley's phones. We can turn the tables on them. I can set up a continuous monitor, so every time a call comes through on those lines, it will signal my system and begin digital recordings in the Message Center."

Vincent went to work but after fifteen minutes of frenzied keyboarding he kicked back his chair and stood up. "Fuck this."

"What's wrong?"

He indicated the onscreen schematics which looked like the blueprints of complicated electrical plans. Two nodes bore flashing signals. "Styles' and Bentley's phones. This stuff is usually easy as pie. I can eavesdrop on any conversation I want. As a teen, I used to do this kinda stuff for kicks. But these guys— I can't understand it— their lines must have some type of beefed-up protection, independent of the phone company. It's not just the encryption. That I can decode. It's— They're using multiple firewalls and 2048 bit encryption. It'd take my systems twelve, twenty-four hours to crack it."

Susan shook her head.

Vincent stared at the screen. It would go a whole lot faster if he cracked into the Department of Defense supercomputers, and enlisted their help, as he would've done without even thinking in the past. He remembered the trouble he'd gotten into the last time he'd done things close to this. The FBI, his arrest, and conviction for computer fraud, but he didn't share that with her.

He rubbed his chin, "Guess I'm not the wizard I thought I was. It'd be a waste to sit around and wait, though. They're sure to be talking a lot while you're on the loose. And I'd really like to hear what they're saying."

Vincent loaded another decryption program and muttered that two 'heads' were better than one. "It'll slow the work on Leland's secret." He became pensive, then

snapped his fingers and smiled. "I think I've got us a plan. Let's see how it pans out."

HE HACKED INTO the Delta Airlines Network and reserved a booking out of LaGuardia's Marine terminal for Susan, using aliases, on two different flights leaving the next day. One in the morning, another in the afternoon. Then, after getting details of her family (her estranged mother, a step-father and step-brother in Boston) he booked a seat using her credit card number on a flight to Boston the next evening.

"Decoy," he explained and noticed that she had her right hand balled in a tight fist. Her left hand was clasped over her mouth. "You okay?"

"Yeah, fine. What if I have to leave before then?" She didn't look at him.

"Er- my friend Joe's place. But there's much we need to do before then."

She nodded. Clasped her hands together. Her face had paled.

"Since we can't get immediate soft access to Bentley or Styles-" He gestured at the screen- "I- er- I have to go for hard access."

Vincent gave her a strange look then pressed the speed dial on his cordless phone. "My pals in Chinatown run a Spy Shop." He turned away and chatted incomprehensibly. The animated conversation went on for about ten minutes, Vincent gesticulating as though he were speaking to his friends in person. Finally he spoke English. "Yeah. That's just Cosmic, man. Thanks John," he said and ended the call.

Susan tried to smile. "Wow. You speak Chinese?"

"Cantonese." He laughed. "And Mandarin, Japanese, Spanish, French, German, Hebrew. Anyway, these guys can get me the relay devices to set up special phone taps on Bentley's home and office phones. As the primary target, I think Styles is going to be impossible. He's too secure. As for Bentley's cell, the guys'll arrange a Cellscope and roving tap by Monday, earliest."

He noticed she was rocking back and forth. Her teeth were chattering. "Hey, Susan. Can I get you something?"

"It's just the concussion. Tremors. It'll pass. I'll take something in a minute."

He looked into her eyes. "You sure? Okay then. For this plan to work, there's a perilous—or as you may say—insane, thing to be done."

"You need to actually, ph-physically install these devices?"

"That's right. In Bentley's office and home. And you're going to guide me."

"That's not insane, Vincent. T-That's impossible."

He smiled. "And that's exactly what they said to me about SW500."

SHE COULD HOLD out no longer. En route to the guest room, she'd rushed to the kitchen and scored her fix. Then she used the strawberry blond hair tint Vincent had ordered online to transform her into a short-cropped, dark strawberry blond.

Vincent fabricated fake hospital ID tags with digital camera, laser printer and laminating machine. Noticing Susan's backpack slung over her chair, he had an idea. Taking out the cop's gun, he studied it for a while. It was big and bulky, perhaps a bit dramatic for what they were about to do. But a weapon was leverage. It expedited negotiation and escape. Reluctantly, he placed it on the worktop, covered it with paper.

Going to his VR room he unlocked the top drawer of a bureau and removed a small antique object. Cradling it in his palm, he ran a finger over the carved ivory inlays and expert craftsmanship, before slipping it into the back of his jeans.

It was almost 2 PM when he set his online message center to record all incoming calls without answering. He carefully checked the security monitors once before leaving the lab, and again while they were in the elevator cab going down.

49

IT WAS A THING of beauty amidst all the ugliness she had to endure.

The one thing Susan really loved besides her career and the family she'd lost: a motorbike. The love affair began years ago when she'd ride pillion on her father's prized ancient Harley to school every day. For weekends they'd use the custom-made sidecar for her mom, wearing the ancient rider's goggles and cap like an old WW2 movie. She'd gotten her own bike in high school. Rode the same rickety job around Harvard during her undergrad years. It was an embarrassingly pink 50cc, front basket and all, which was the only thing she could afford at the time. But it was a tribute to Daddy and his ideals: Save time, save money, maybe save the environment.

So it was a touching surprise when she saw the gleaming Harley Davidson under the lights of his private basement parking garage—black and gold with splendent chrome trim. For a long moment she was home again, reveling in the envious stares of her friends, smelling the salt air of the Back Bay, breathing hard against the wind, her body pressed tightly against her father's leather jacket. "Wow," she finally said. "Screaming Eagle V-Rod. 1250 cc's. 240 wide rear tires. My dream machine." She immediately mounted it, running her hands over its sleek metallic lines which felt like velvet, giggling like a little girl over its exclusive paint job and form. She pressed her cheeks against its chilled polished skin and told him about her love of bikes, how she always dreamed of one day owning a Harley.

He looked genuinely surprised. "You ride?"

She told him about her pink Suzuki at Harvard. "Now I have something more respectable, of course. My Dad owned a Harley, but nothing compared to this."

He shrugged. "I started out with far less. Hoofing it and public transport until the last couple of years. Maybe you can ride on the way back. Get closer to the dream."

They left astride the Harley, via a rear exit on 8th Street after he'd switched off his cellphone. "They can track you even when a call isn't being made. Of course, in extreme cases they can even remotely turn on your phone and access data."

Onto Avenue C they glided, down East Houston, then Mott Street, Chinatown, where he parked just before the corner of Bayard and entered the electronics store.

Within minutes he returned with the equipment in a small flat gray box. There were four half-inch black silicon squares, like the processor chips of a PC, each with a male nine-pin docking slot. Vincent docked each of two squares into his handheld PC. "I'm configuring these relay devices with mine and Bentley's phone numbers. Those are the spares in case I screw up. My pals don't seem to have much confidence in me. These chips act as mini exchanges linking the targeted phone through switches at the central exchange with mine at the apartment."

Before mounting the bike, Vincent said, "Now we need coveralls."

Forty minutes later they found a phone crew working overtime in the East Village. This time Vincent returned from his mission, minus a wad of hundred-dollar bills, but with coveralls, ID tags, and a clipboard, leaving behind two inappropriately attired, but beaming workmen beside their van. "These are the most expensive coveralls in the country," he quipped, slipping the items into the pannier of the Harley.

Nearing First Avenue, Susan felt the first strains of panic. Thank God for the meds in Vincent's place or she'd never have coped. Looking up, the gray building with its dark windows had only bad memories now. Standing beside her, Vincent noticed.

"Hey, remember, this'd be your least expected move. If Pockmark contacted his people, then the apartment would be the most logical primary target. At the risk of

sounding repetitive, think of this as a real-time strategy game. If you don't know what that means, just act like you know what you're doing. Confidence and purpose combined gives you the license to do just about anything."

They were dressed in Vincent's old white lab coats, over T-shirts and jeans with ID tags clipped to their pockets and stethoscopes slung around their necks. Dr V. S. Bach was embroidered in running letters over *both* their top pockets. They could've been interns returning from lunch. Nobody really cared this quiet Saturday afternoon.

Susan led him up to the Virology suites, her anxiety returning as familiar people nodded greetings. Though they didn't recognize her, every step brought a thud of fear.

Seeing Bentley's office and her own again down that corridor— the sights, smells— she knew this was the furthest you could get from any game. It was easy for Vincent. He wasn't the one running for his life. Her chest tightened, her heart pounded. It was the same thing all over again, the street, the chase, the unimaginable terror of the previous night when she'd come here and suffered her narrow escape.

Pure madness, she thought. Thankfully this area was mostly deserted weekends and Bentley's tight-assed secretary Debbie, would not be manning his domain. The sign outside said he was out. But Susan, voice hoarse with tension, cautioned Vincent. "'Out' simply meant not in the office. Bentley might still be in the hospital. Long as I'm on the loose, every day's a work day for Bentley and co."

Vincent jimmied the simple lock with his pocket tools and entered the anteroom

Susan said, "I'll keep watch outside. Coughing signals danger, okay."

Barely five minutes into her watch, Susan heard footsteps approaching the corner at the end of the corridor. Her heart sank. Despite the disguise, if it was Bentley, she didn't doubt he'd recognize her at this close range.

When the figure turned the corner, she gulped. Dr Dwight Poole walked straight

toward her. His office was immediately before Bentley's, diagonally opposite the warren of cubicle-sized nests for those lower in the department hierarchy, like herself. She thought to quickly slip into Bentley's suite but Poole had already spotted her.

She nodded a casual greeting and feigned waiting to enter Bentley's suite.

To her dismay, Poole continued past his own door and closed in on her.

VINCENT'S TASK WAS much easier than he'd anticipated. Taking Bentley's grimy desk phone apart and putting it back together again had taken most of the time. Following his pal's instructions to the letter, inserting and connecting up the chip was a cinch. When he was done, he took a moment to appraise his work, appreciating the ease with which something so sophisticated could be so simply put to work.

It was only while he backed away from Bentley's desk that he realized how rapid his heartbeat was. That he was wet around his neck, armpits and sweat dripped down his face. Understandable, he thought. *Sitting at my computer, breaking into top secret classified sites, was child's play compared to real world breaking and entering.* He mopped his brow with his sleeve and reached for the door.

50

SUSAN HEARD Vincent's muted footsteps approaching her. She even heard the door handle turn—the creak of the ancient spring inside the lock. Inexplicably, they were louder than the sound of blood crashing like surf in her ears.

All this while Poole's face, eerily pale and drawn into a constant smirk, was directly in front of hers, probing her eyes with his ghostly gray ones. She remembered the signal for danger but was unable to let out even a whimper let alone a cough.

Somehow though, she managed a nervous smile. Make it really cheery, she urged herself. *Something the real Dr Susan Conner would never do. But . . . what if he notices the discrepancy between the name on the tag and the coat?*

Her smile broadened. She nodded at Poole and knocked hard on the door.

He frowned, indicated the sign, "Guess you missed that. Chief's on rounds. Perhaps I can be of help—" He squinted at the embroidered name, "— Dr Bach?"

"Silly me," she giggled. "Guess I'll just pop down to the wards then, thank you."

"WELL, AT LEAST we know the Professor's not home," Vincent said when he caught up with her at the elevators. Catching her look of disapproval, he added, "Sorry. Close call that time. It'll be much better when we get to Brooklyn Heights, you'll see."

Susan had been to the Bentley's a couple of times for fund-raisers in aid of Mrs Bentley's charities. She remembered, with a twinge, that Leland had been there. Eileen, too. She had no idea they were lovers then—two people she barely knew in life. Now they were dead, and she was linked to them by a common purpose, a common peril.

On the Brooklyn side of the East River, they passed streets with names like

Cranberry, Orange and Pineapple in a neighborhood that appeared to have come from another century. Homes were ancient Federal-style brownstones and wooden clapboard that stood dappled and regal in their quiet exhibition of history.

Vincent changed into the workmen's coveralls in a park. With a penknife, he slit open one of the laminated phone company ID's and slipped in a snapshot of his own. Then clipped this to his front pocket and rehearsed his lines: "Afternoon, Ma'am. I'm from the phone company. There's an intermittent problem in the area. Emergency crews are giving doctor's lines a priority maintenance check, on account of it being the weekend. Won't be five minutes, unless you're busy and would like us to come back Monday. Can't guarantee you'll have a service till then, though."

"Only problem with that." Susan said, "She probably has a cell phone just like her husband and wouldn't really care if her landline went dead."

"Let's hope she's a frugal lady who likes her traditional values, then."

Twenty minutes later, Vincent returned, looking very pleased with himself. He held a grease-stained paper bag. "Mrs Bentley was so thankful for the company's consideration, she insisted I accept some freshly baked choc-chip cookies in thanks."

"My favorite," Susan said, reaching for the bag.

Vincent held on. "What say we save this for dessert, and get some real food along the way. You hungry?"

"Famished."

"Alright. Then Joe's it is. You've gotta taste his cheeseburger. Best in the land. And I want you to meet my friend. We might need his help before this is over."

"SUSAN, MEET JOE, the big brother I never had. The friend I love and trust with my life. And this place," Vincent gestured broadly, "My second home. I used to live in a

run-down rent-controlled dump close by with Christian and Aunt Naomi, before the ‘cure’. This is where most of my friends hang out.”

Joe gave Susan a mild bow and kept up a slightly embarrassed toothy smile. He was a handsome, lanky, craggy-faced late fiftyish hippy. A cross between an ageing tech-jock with ponytails, and a ‘flower power’ guy, she thought. He wiped his hand on a tea towel at his shoulder and gave her a firm handshake. “Great to meet you, Susan. Any friend of this kid’s a friend of mine. Make yourself at home,” he said and disappeared into the kitchen.

The place, an ageing nineteen-sixties-style getup was rowdy, full. They waited at a counter with teenagers sipping milkshakes, then made their way to the back where she noticed several families with little kids. They sat at a booth with a TV.

Vincent said, “Joe looks like a freewheeler but he’s big on community stuff—the church, youth, especially. Families around here support him in return. After my mom died, he took care of Chris and me.”

“It’s a lovely place, Vincent.”

He nodded. “Yeah. Hey, I’m just gonna go talk to Joe for a minute. Order me a “special” will you and get whatever you like when Keisha comes around.” He waved at a young waitress cleaning a nearby table and left Susan to her thoughts.

It *was* a lovely place. Safe, nurturing, anachronistic—a piece of small town USA in the heart of Manhattan, a throwback to something she could remember from her childhood. Which was why she couldn’t bear it. It made her yearn for her own family. And worse, the sight of ordinary folks doing ordinary things heightened her own isolation, her surreal banishment from real life. It reminded her she was a fugitive and kept her constantly afraid of being recognized.

“WHOA, SUSAN, what’s wrong?”

Her face had blanched, her breathing strained. Vincent was returning to the booth when he saw her hand fly to her mouth, caught the pained expression on her face.

Without looking his way, she pointed at the TV above the booth.

Vincent caught a glimpse of her face on the screen before it was replaced by the nurse, Eileen Griffith, whom he recognized from the newspaper photo. This was quickly replaced by another. The caption read: *Dr Jason Wells*. The field reporter, a pert brunette, was talking about a series of bizarre tragedies associated with NYU Medical Center. They’d found Dr Jason Wells dead in his apartment. Police suspected a drug overdose, but couldn’t confirm anything yet. He’d probably been dead since Thursday.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. Vincent took her hand. “Hey, I’m sorry.”

“They’re lying, Vincent. He was murdered. Jason told me they were after him and I didn’t believe him. God. That could so easily have been me.”

“Coulda been but wasn’t. Focus on that, okay. And I’m . . . well, kinda trying to do the knight in shining armor thing here, so . . . focus on that too.”

She nodded, wiped her eyes and held his gaze when she noticed the way he regarded her. She smiled with guilt and a poignant sense of pity for this young and innocent romantic. A worldly wise man would’ve long figured she was dangerous, and that he was being exploited, placed in harm’s way for a stranger who even now craved the drugs without which she couldn’t survive.

The right thing to do was walk away, go to DC, head straight for the FBI, and surrender to her fate. She shuddered and closed her eyes. Whatever the right thing, all she longed for now was the comfort of his apartment, his companionship, the sustenance of his drug cupboard. She was terrified of being alone again.

HELEN. TYRONE. HARVEY Leland, Eileen. Now Jason Wells.

Sweet Jason Wells whom she'd doubted and hounded in the CRU. She pictured his bewildered look, his hunted eyes. Now he was dead. And she was next.

Susan pushed her food away, feeling ill.

As Vincent spoke of his plans, running through them again, she tried to focus. She breathed slowly, carefully, trying to tune in, shift her mind from the things she could not change. In time she became entranced by the small, quick movements of his mouth, eyes flashing emphasis, his habit of pushing away his hair, his ebullience.

Vincent's strong optimism, his mere presence helped. And Jason's death soon withdrew into the television as something unreal, movie-like. She'd wake up tomorrow and Jason will still be there, working in the hospital, doing rounds. Just like her.

Her anxiety faded, like the afternoon. They discussed their suspicions, plans. To keep her mind occupied, he opened up about his childhood, the Academy for gifted children he'd attended. She heard more about his parents, his brother Christian and, of course, how he'd arrived at the hypothesis that finally led to SW500.

When they eventually left Joe's, it was after dusk, the cityscape a jagged indigo splashed with neon. It had been a day of pure horror, one of the worst in her life, and yet the moments with Vincent in his unique world, she could equate with the best of times.

Now in the frigid air outside, as she watched her friend, his profile serene against the evening, she shivered from an inexplicable sense of dread for him.

51

SUSAN HELD HER breath under the helmet—not once, but for several stretches—while she maneuvered the powerful Harley through the throng of vehicles clogging the streets. Despite her years of riding experience, she kept imagining the V-Rod lying mangled on the blacktop and it took a supreme effort of concentration to maintain a strong mindset and keep the two-wheeler upright and heading in the right direction.

“It’s easier than riding most other bikes once you get the hang of it,” he’d said.

Fortunately she took to the great machine easily (after the first few tentative miles) relishing the exuberance in its power.

A few blocks before 8th Street Vincent stopped her. Before making the changeover, he regarded her for a moment.

“Okay, despite what I said, maybe you should spend tonight elsewhere. If it’s not Pockmark, it could be their backup, goons we won’t know or recognize.”

“What about you?”

“It’s not me they’re after. In any case, for now I need access to the lab and my VR stuff if I’m to make any headway into the SW500 problem. So I have to stay here.”

“Then I’ll stay with you. Just for tonight,” she pleaded. “I’m not well, Vincent, and I’m exhausted. You’ve got all those cams to alert us. And your Fortress of Solitude is like a secret vault. We can hide in there. I- I can’t imagine being alone right now.”

He shrugged. “Then let’s pray the cops have found a string of priors to keep our boys locked up for the weekend. Bad guys don’t turn bad overnight.”

Once she was settled in behind him, Vincent rode the wrong way up a few one-way streets. He went by the front and back of his building a couple of times, scanning

the streets. When he felt certain they were safe, he rode up to the 8th Street entrance, activated the remote and parked the bike in the basement.

They took the stairs to the first floor lobby where Vincent inserted his key card in the elevator. He remained silent, thinking, wondering if Pockmark had contacted Styles (directly or through Michael Moran—if he still worked there). If so, Styles would've figured his involvement by now.

Vincent had learned much about Styles during his term at Sloane-Wright. For his small stature, the man compensated by being a fearsome employer. Staff trembled in his presence. He openly castigated erring workers and yelled at people in his path. Yet, there was never dissent, never a muttered complaint in the man's absence. Though Vincent had been treated like celebrity by Styles, the workers' terror had been so pervasive that a degree of it had crept into Vincent's psyche. To the effect that he now sensed a rising trepidation as he wondered what Styles might be planning right now.

He gazed askance at Susan, feeling guilty and exultant at her decision to spend the night at his place. His mind slipped into a lurid fantasy of him lying in bed with her, acceding to her sexual whims. However, his fear of Styles couldn't reconcile with those thoughts and he mentally chided himself. Sure, tomorrow he would have her out of New York. He would contact Hymie in DC, and take things from there. But it was reckless, illogical to keep her at the apartment tonight.

"You should gather your stuff," he said, "Plus whatever else you need from the guest room, right away. I'm sending you to Joe's. He suggested it earlier, so no problem. You'll be safe there till tomorrow, when you leave for DC."

She yawned. "Whatever you say, Vincent. All I want to do is get some sleep."

She turned away, her lips curled—in petulance or disappointment—he couldn't tell. His gaze lingered over her, indirectly, noting her forlorn expression, the way

sadness etched its mask of quiet resignation in her pallid features. As she absently swallowed—nerves and fear, perhaps—he watched the small movement of her delicate chin, the roll of her dainty Adam's Apple in her long neck and felt an urge to lift her face to him and kiss her lips, her chin, the soft rise of her throat.

The grind and shudder of the slowing elevator broke the peace. She turned to him with a self-conscious smile. He reciprocated, enjoying the connection and reached for her hand. But stopped, frowned, as he spotted something on the floor.

Looking up, he sniffed the air, understanding now his growing trepidation, the sense that something was different, the barest notion that all wasn't well.

Vincent swung around.

And in the instant he lunged for the stop button, he knew it was too late to halt the coming horror. The elevator had come to a juddering halt at the penthouse, rendering his notion a certainty. It was a feeling akin to that when a stranger has passed through one's private space, leaving the barest hint of a foreign odor. Only now there was more. The cigarette butt on the floor: the absence of light in his hallway, the exposed keypad of his alarm console beside the elevator door.

Vincent reached for Susan as his fingers jabbed at the close buttons.

But she wasn't there.

Instead, a bright light struck his eyes. Someone yanked him by the front of his jacket, out of the elevator, toward the sound of gravelly laughter in the darkness beyond.

52

THE LIGHTS CAME on. Pockmark was holding a pistol aimed at him. Susan was making a scene, struggling, kicking wildly at the short balding Latino who held her by the elbow. Vincent flinched as the man struck Susan on the face.

They were shoved toward his living room, glass crunching heavily underfoot.

He heard her gasp then whimper at the scene even as he tried to control his own shock at the horror he encountered here. It looked as though a storm of extraordinary fury had torn through the place. The leather sofas had been slashed and ripped, his prized ornaments, priceless works of art on walls and stands, the Ming vases, the Indian Totems and artifacts, totally trashed. Shards of glass glittered from carpets and the guts of seating protruded like bowels of eviscerated animals.

From across the room, he signaled her with an infinitesimal gesture—a blink and nod. “Be cool, don’t panic,” he wished he could say to her.

Pockmark waved a keycard and grinned. “Guess who forgot to change the locks. Thanks for the convenient oversight, Bach.”

He caught Susan’s bewildered look, said, “Sloane-Wright owns the building.”

“Yeah, Doc. So instead of running away, you were heading right back to us. Not very smart.” He grabbed Susan by the chin and pressed the barrel of the gun into her cheek. “Now as you can see,” he gestured around the room, “We’ve had quite a time trying to find those stolen files. If you give them to me, maybe we won’t have to go through the whole apartment looking and maybe I won’t shoot your beautiful friend here in the face.” He pushed her away and waved the gun at Vincent. “Now!”

“It won’t do you any good,” Susan said. “I brought copies. The originals are in a

safe location, to be released if any harm comes to me.”

“She’s right,” Vincent said. “I faxed copies to the FBI, FDA, Newspapers. It’s over. Styles and gang are set to take the fall. Leave us and we won’t incriminate you.”

“Aw, how sweet. Sounds like a deal I can’t refuse. Yet I have to, because I’m no idiot. And this ain’t the movies.” The big man turned to his partner. “Get me some lengths of cord, Carlo. We’re gonna make sure they don’t insult my intelligence again.”

Carlo went about ripping electrical cords from lampshades and appliances.

Pockmark knotted them together to construct a makeshift noose which he strung around Susan’s neck, slung it over a ceiling beam and started to pull. His moves were so swift, so decisive, Vincent gasped at how quickly Susan’s cries became a gurgle.

The noose dug into her throat, her whole body balancing on the tips of her toes, ballerina-style to keep from choking to death.

Vincent lurched. “Jesus! Okay, I’ll get the files. Please stop hurting her.”

Pockmark pulled harder. “Longer you take, quicker she dies. It’s up to you, Bach.” He turned to his partner. “Carlo. He tries anything, make it his last move.”

Vincent was already moving when the stocky man shoved the gun into his back. By the time they returned, Susan’s eyes were bulging, her lips turning blue.

“Let her go, please!” Vincent yelled, as Carlo held out the files.

He let go and Vincent ran to Susan as she collapsed in a heap amidst the debris.

“You want I should do them now?” Carlo said.

The big man shook his head. “Cops picked us up just outside, remember? And the building’s owned by the company.”

“So . . .?”

“So get the fucking car, you moron. Bring it out front. We gonna feed the fish in the East River, tonight.”

53

SATURDAY EVENING. The Pro made it his policy never to meet personally with clients. The risks were obvious. His reputation as the ghost might disappear like one. However, on the rare occasion, it did happen . . . for the right reason. This was his biggest payday to date. He could see his swansong turning into an epic.

Of course, there was the other matter, Roman thought. They *had* to see him, to confirm whether he suited the plan. And he'd agreed. They'd checked him for height, build, eye color. And just for that, two mill had already been deposited into his account.

Tomorrow they'd take him to the lab again, more fittings and special effects so that he could go into this job as someone else. It was going to be different, intriguing.

He liked that.

THE GUYS IN the Buick had been staked outside Vincent's apartment for what- seven, eight hours, since they tailed the guy from the hotel? Nowhere near the record for a stakeout. But that didn't matter. The end justified the means: The files had to be obtained; the doctor silenced; her location made known to the locals. This was a big op— if not in numbers then in priority.

The incident with the local cops had been a temporary setback. They'd taken high-powered photos of their man tailing the doc and transmitted the data via cell phone back to the field office on Broadway. It's how they learned about the stolen vehicle story. It meant the doc had friends in high places. Powerful friends— which, of course, explained why they were here. Now that the men had been released by the NYPD, they felt certain they'd show up here again.

Eventually, they spotted the pair, the Face and his Latino partner on foot, sidling up along the sidewalk on the same side of the building they'd been so interested in earlier. The G-man in the passenger seat had begun zooming in with the camera as the pair rushed up to the front door and slipped into the lobby.

That had been over two hours ago.

Now they watched the Latino burst from the lobby. He jogged up the street—not to the gray Ford, but a black Lincoln, this time. He brought the car to the entrance of the building. Presently, the big guy appeared with the doctor- their target- and an unknown male who were huddled into the Lincoln and the car sped off.

54

THE PIER WAS DARK and bitterly cold, the stench sudden and overpowering as they stumbled toward the water's edge. Pockmark with her; Carlo with Vincent. A bony moon bobbed on the silvery sludge of the East River, its reluctant light barely lifting into the foul, foggy air.

She whimpered. Pockmark's grip was brutal at her elbow, his fingers digging into her skin, bringing stars to her eyes. She opened her mouth to scream but her voice ended in a little croak in her throat. Her body rippled with fear, her teeth chattered. With each step, the metal of his gun rubbed against her neck, an icy reminder of her fate.

Her breathing became more difficult as hysteria lapped on the dark edge of her consciousness. She glimpsed Vincent in the cold moonlight. His eyes reflected the distant lights of East River Drive. His cheeks, the dimple on his chin, were hopeless black pools.

Hopeless too, she closed her eyes and decided to let go. Once or twice he thumped her head telling her to shut up and she realized she had been mewling. In time, in the darkness, it felt like she'd slipped out of her body, leaving behind a ragged, pitiful woman who collapsed to her knees, who was yanked up, who stumbled and fell repeatedly as words tumbled over her quivering lips, professing Vincent's innocence, begging for mercy. Then someone slapped her across her face. "Shut the fuck up, will ya?" She was yanked up, the brutality rousing her. In the pale moonlight she saw Vincent, a few feet away from her.

He looked serene, untouched, his eyes locked on her own. Again, he gave her a miniscule blink, the barest nod. Then there was a diversion in his gaze. She followed it

to the street, toward the incessant roar and hum of traffic on East River Drive.

A vehicle had turned off the road, its headlights sweeping across them like the glare of small suns in the blackness. The transient light showed Pockmark and Carlo turned toward the road. Two silhouetted figures emerged from a car and headed for the Lincoln above the beach.

A loud crack went off. She heard fumbling, a thud. Then a deafening report shattered the air. Something heavy slammed into her. She felt sharp pain.

And then she was falling, the moonlight fading away.

55

SO THIS IS what dying feels like. No flashing images. No reliving one's life in the final moments. Just shock. Disbelief. Numbness . . . And then pain.

It was a razor of fire somewhere so deep, she couldn't reach it. She battled to breathe, the rasping air coming in agonizing gasps as the burning rose, seared through her lungs while her chest was being crushed, squeezing the life out of her, taking her deeper into the darkness—

—through which someone was calling out to her.

"Susan? Hey, Susan?"

She glimpsed Vincent's dark form backlit by a hazy moon. His voice was an echo—distant and small. He was huffing and puffing, lifting something heavy off her.

Her chest felt lighter. She could breathe again—huge gulps of air that made her dizzy, cough. Vincent's face glistened with sweat, talking to her, helping her to her feet.

There was pain at her side. Her hands came away sticky, dripping with blood.

"Oh God, Vincent, I've been shot."

"Impossible. There were only two shots. The first when I took Carlo by surprise in the dark. The second when I got the big guy. He toppled onto you. It must be his blood. I'm amazed he didn't crush your bones." Talking fast Vincent grabbed her hand and gestured up the hill where two silhouetted figures were making their way toward them. "Now let's get moving or we'll really end up floating in the river."

The figures appeared awkward on the uneven ground. Vincent could make out little except to guess they were men.

"Pock and Carlo were the least of our problems," he said. "C'mon."

He broke into a jog, leading her back the way they'd come. At the shallowest edge of the pier, they jumped down onto hard cold sand. For an instant before he left the pier, in the pale moonlight, Vincent glimpsed the strangers' clothes and frowned. "Keep to the shadows, until we get up close to the road but farther down, away from them."

They increased their pace for at least half a mile parallel to East River Drive. Stopping to catch their breaths, they noticed the figures returning to the parked cars, going to the Lincoln first, opening and closing doors, before taking off in their own car.

Susan and Vincent watched, waited, and when it became clear the second car had sped off in the opposite direction, she turned to him.

"Who're they?"

"Not sure," he said, *but I have an inkling.*

She squeezed his hand, her teeth chattering. "How'd you do it, Vincent?"

He held something out to her. It was made from a dark smooth metal. The small bulbous grip was inlaid with ivory- a beautiful piece. "My father's derringer 2 shot. I slipped this into my jeans just before we left the apartment earlier. Never imagined I'd get to use it. When these goons jumped us earlier, I was too stunned, too scared to use it. I guess the dark out here helped." He breathed deep. "Dad bought this off some acquaintance or other when I was little. Paid handsomely, thinking it was an antique original Deringer, but it turned out to be an imitation- a derringer, spelt with a double R and synthetic ivory. Anyway, I've always kept it around. As fate would have it, most originals only have one round in the chamber- a backup, emergency piece. But it was essentially a lady's weapon- easily concealed on the body or in a small handbag. This "imitation" has two rounds, so it just about saved our lives." Looking skyward as he slipped the gun back into his pocket, Vincent whispered, "Thanks, Dad."

He took Susan's hand again, began walking in the direction of the Lincoln.

She held back. "Where we headed?"

"The Penthouse."

"But . . . they already know. . ."

He shrugged. "They knew. They tried to kill us. We won. So for now it's necessary risk. Out here on the street, you're good as dead. And there's nothing I can achieve without the phone taps, my lab, Leland's Flash. They're the keys to everything. You'll be safe. I figure Sloane-Wright's waiting on these goons to deliver the goods. So it'll be a while before they discover this and come after us."

"What if the mystery figures were Sloane-Wright back up?" By now she was shaking, her words almost slurred from her dry, heavy tongue.

"Then they'd never have given up so easily." Vincent sighed. "As I said, I have a theory who they are. I have to check the security cam recordings to make sure."

"How we going to get back?"

"The way we came. No way we're catching a cab out here."

When they got to the car, the backpack from the Lincoln was gone.

"If they were Sloane-Wright guys they wouldn't just take the files and run. They'd want you dead," Vincent observed.

A wail of sirens blared through the night. "Better get out of here," Vincent said. "Whoever they were they've probably raised the alarm." He reached for the keys and swore. "Carlo must've taken them with him."

Susan trembled, images of Vincent's medicine cupboard flashed through her mind. "Can't you hot-wire it or something?"

He shook his head and opened the door. "This isn't the movies. Wait here."

Vincent scrambled down the incline, disappeared into the darkness, then reemerged like a ghost half way up the rise. When he got the car started, the police

lights were dancing parallel to them. Then the sirens Dopplered into the distance.

"Saturday night New York," Vincent muttered, gunning the engine.

AS HE WALKED through his apartment noting the mess, Susan sought her treasure cupboard in his kitchen. When he found her she was in the midst of the living room ruins. Knees against her chin, arms hugging her legs, she rocked back and forth on the least damaged wingback. Her face lay in the shadows of her hair, her hands and clothing bloodied. He heard her muted sobbing as he approached her, glass crunching underfoot.

"Hey. How you holding up?"

"This is madness," she whispered. "Madness upon madness, Vincent. I think back and it's a blur how I got to this point. I just wanted to help those innocent patients. Didn't want them to die like my family did . . . At the hands of murderers. I didn't want to sit back and let it happen. I wanted to do something to make it right, get my honor back. Now I just want out. I don't want to die. I wish you could get me out of here. Put me on a plane to someplace— South Africa, Australia, anywhere. I just want out."

He knelt and took her face in his hands. "You can't quit. Not now, not after what we know. You've gone through hell, but you'll prevail because . . . Christ, you're the toughest woman I've ever met . . . and because I'm sticking with you all the way."

Closing her eyes, she pressed her cheeks to his palms. "I don't know, I . . ."

Her face against his skin was soft, cold from tears. Wisps of hair lay like down against her damp, pale skin. Her lips were puffy, moist, deep red from biting. It made her mouth a red smudge from which her breath issued in light sobs. Its musky odor reached him, stirred him, drew him down to her face. Her breath this close was hot, a light flame that licked his skin and lit another at his knees, sending its heat upwards.

Squirming, Vincent adjusted himself, eased a hand away from her face and

caressed her neck, the arch of her back. He ran his lips along her forehead, her cheeks, then kissed her on the lips, tasting the briny tears there. Susan fell against him, her acceptance like a long sigh as she drew back to breathe and let him kiss her again, her hunger seeking his own.

They kissed. He loved the way she leaned into him, a little awed by her rapidly beating heart on his chest, the way her breasts crushed against him. He closed his eyes, but all too soon he sensed her shudder, felt her stiffen, heard the sound of rushing air and realized she had drawn her mouth away from his.

He opened his eyes, bewildered by the sound of her sobbing, her hands against his chest pushing him away and she, shaking her head.

56

"I'M SORRY, VINCENT. I can't do this . . . I'm sorry . . ." She inclined her head pityingly, her soft gaze and her tone uncertain, faltering. "I didn't mean to give the impression . . ." Her words trailed off.

"Hey, it's cool. You don't have to explain. You're vulnerable right now and I was outta line. Sorry."

"And you don't need to apologize, Vincent. You're the kindest, most beautiful man I know. No apologies ever, okay. Not when you've become the friend you are."

He saw the pitying look again and winced.

"Yeah. Sure." He avoided her eyes. "Think I need a cold Bud. Get you anything?"

"Whatever you're having, thanks."

Avoiding the small bar off his lounge Vincent escaped to his kitchen. Relieved to be out of her sight. "Schmuck," he said before returning with her drink.

"We're going to have to clean this up," she said.

He waved it away, not looking at her. "I'll make some calls in the morning."

"Maybe I should go. All I've done is caused you trouble, brought you this close to death. My life is insignificant. You're the young marvel, the gift to this world, Vincent. Losing you would've been the unforgivable crime and . . . God, I don't want a Pyrrhic victory. I don't want the interminable car chase where a whole town and a hundred civilians are sacrificed in apprehending the bad guy whose life is worthless. I can't be responsible f—"

"Stop it, already!" He turned away from her battling to keep the heat out of his

voice. "It's not your fault. None of this is your fault. I'm responsible. Scientists worth a damn, push the envelope, risking more than lives to bring dreams to fruition. And I'm a grown man, not a kid. So, don't go taking the blame for me." He looked at her directly then sighed. "I wish I had a real damned drink, right now. You could do with one too. Just wish I had some around here."

In answer to her curious look, he explained, "My old Aunt Naomi came to live with us after my mother died. She had a drinking problem so I dried up the place. She died almost six months ago, and I only recently started keeping some wine and beer."

She smiled. "It's for the better then. My friends at college used to call me a "one drink wonder" on account of my becoming punch drunk with one glass of bourbon."

They finished their drinks in silence then exchanged an awkward glance, nodding in agreement that it was time to move on. Susan needed a shower. Vincent turned for the lab.

"If you need me, dial 11 from any phone in the apartment," he said.

THE LAB WAS quiet again. Just like yesterday, and the weeks and months he spent here alone. Only the familiar hum and beeps of machines communicating with each other, and with him, he liked to think. Sometimes he was lucky, Christian wasn't too busy with his own pals at college and visited for a few days after much urging. Christmas, of course. Thanksgiving weekend. And occasionally a week in the summer. He cherished those moments with the boy, who'd spend hours in the VR cube and with his online games— most of which Vincent finished in minutes much to Christian's awe and envy. His brother was eight years his junior, but their relationship in the absence of parents was like father and son. Christian, just out of his teens, had long since grown into his own man. And Vincent, only twenty-eight, already lived through the hurt of a parent

whose kid had his own life and was growing distant.

For most of the year, the lab was home to Vincent, a solitary figure who converted real life into codes and created worlds that gave him the comfort and, sometimes, the joy of a life he never had. He spent a significant part of his week in the virtual 3-D world of his online creation *DreamLife*. It was a place where internet users registered for a monthly fee and lived out alternate lives as avatars to their real ones. He'd raised the finance from other similar online worlds where he'd bought and developed properties, or developed skilled avatars to a valuable stage, which he then sold through e-Bay.

Friends were abundant. Any young man with money had friends aplenty. But they hovered on the fringes of a life beyond anything Vincent yearned for. No one ever entered this lab but he and Christian. Until Susan came along, that is.

Susan. She might be a physician, an expert in viral genetics, someone with a conscience, a hauntingly beautiful woman seeking his help. But mostly she was just a wounded soul trying to do some good to right the misery of her life, he thought. He realized she was suffering from survivor's guilt. Her family had been murdered. She'd survived. Guilt, misery and fear belied her courage. The many women he'd known didn't feature in the same book- let alone the same chapter as her. So it was natural, he guessed, that he'd fall for her like that. People in stressful situations could either grow apart or seek one another. He'd reacted predictably- a lonely geek, following the emotional path of least resistance. His rational self told him it was no big deal. His emotional self cringed like a bumbling freshman scorned.

And so he was relieved for the time alone. Not only because of the encounter with Susan. Ever since the pier, he'd felt strange and out of sorts. Ever since shooting those men, he'd felt the excess salivation in his mouth, the nausea, the need to retch.

Turning to his workstation, he hoped the feeling would soon pass.

He noticed the CPU at rest, which meant the decrypt of Leland's data was done. Good. There was one thing to do before that, however. Earlier he'd initialized recordings from all security cameras. Now he ran digital searches to find the identity of the strangers who'd unwittingly saved their lives at the pier. He felt certain they'd show up on the recordings. The suits had been a dead giveaway, but he knew better than to make assumptions.

As he sat waiting, he felt the bitter salivation again. There was a hollow feeling in his gut. A wave of nausea washed over him. He was thankful Susan wasn't present to witness what he figured was his body's delayed reaction to earlier events. As his hands shook and his knees weakened, Vincent rose and staggered past a door on his right, making it to the small bathroom of his lab in the nick of time.

"Jesus," he whispered, when the retching was over. He rinsed his mouth, brushed his teeth and stared at himself in the small bathroom mirror. Against his pale face, his eyes were darker, older. He frowned. The deeper beating of his heart confirmed the fear he saw in those eyes. It wasn't the fear of those men, but the fear of being powerless, he knew. It was a rare thing for him, for someone who was always in control, who always calculated mathematical probabilities, always felt the power of his mind over outcomes. On the pier tonight, with the frigid black water of the river lapping at his soul, he'd reached a point where the outcome of events felt beyond his control. He'd become an animal, desperate to survive. Reaching for his gun, jabbing it against Carlo, pulling the trigger, then instantaneously aiming and firing at Pockmark, had been pure instinct. But the experience had taken its toll. He still smelled the gunshot residue on his hands, still felt the blood on his fingers, and no amount of retching or scrubbing would take that away from him.

He had a greater appreciation of Susan's situation now. Her survival was a credit to her strength of character. How she'd prevailed till now, and remained motivated, was a mystery. He desperately wished he could find a way to end it all soon.

Finding what he was looking for on the recordings, he cut the results and pasted them in a smaller file to show Susan later.

As he turned for Leland's decrypted files which came up as video files, he noticed the flashing diodes on the Bentley phones.

His heart quickened.

The screen filled with a nervous bespectacled African-American man standing beside a Porsche out on some highway Vincent couldn't immediately identify. Embroidered in red above the left top pocket of his white coat were the words, Dr Harvey Leland, MD.

Leland was handsome, with short hair and a dark square face that immediately reminded Vincent of the actor he'd seen in ancient movie reruns— Mario van Peebles. Vincent heard a blustery noise as Leland's jacked tails fluttered in the wind.

After dabbing at his brow with a white handkerchief, Leland aimed a small remote controller at what Vincent assumed was a digital camera with LCD display on a tripod. Leland's form sharpened in focus as he cleared his throat. "Madam President," Leland began, giving his name and credentials. "Forgive me for taking the extra security precautions for the more direct and personal part of this message. I know that others will be tasked to render this portion of the data decipherable. For this reason, I posted adequate warning earlier so that you may take the necessary steps to preserve your confidentiality." Leland paused. "I wish I were addressing you under different circumstances. I wish there was more time to go into the esoteric details of my grave predicament which poses mortal danger to you. But freedom has become a rare

commodity for me. Even this moment is a snatched one. My home, office, car, cellular phone— are all bugged. And so I find safety only in public places. Privacy in a crowd. Such has become the irony of my existence.” Leland looked away from the camera, over his shoulder and then back again. He took a long breath. “My life is in danger and so is yours, for reasons I will presently explain. When you have finished listening to my explanation, please see the attached file for the e-mails from Sloane-Wright to the MRC in South Africa— (and vice versa) and other correspondence I have enclosed, which I hope will add substance to all that I have said. Gathering my information has warranted certain invasions of privacy which I know to be a crime. But it was the greater crime I wished to avoid which motivated me— the crime against humanity . . .”

Vincent listened intently. He was riveted for thirty minutes as Leland painted a picture of Sloane-Wright, the problems with SW500, the killing of patients and, worst of all, something he knew would shock Susan to the core. By the time the visual presentation was complete, a patina of sweat glistened on Vincent’s brow. The hairs on his arms were raised and he realized he’d been shallow breathing all this while. Inhaling deeply, he rose from his chair, walked over to the window and looked out at the city he loved and that had always been the only home he’d known.

What Leland had said made him sweat fear.

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A FRAGRANT SCARF of shampoo and a vanilla perfume trailed Susan into the lab.

She noted Vincent's troubled expression. "What's up?"

"Leland's video recording," he said. "He made one for the president, about twenty-five minutes' worth. And some documents. We'll go through that as soon as we've checked out the guys from the river." He pointed to one of the monitors. The screen was split four ways. In the bottom right corner, Susan and Vincent were being huddled into the Lincoln. In the background a vehicle eased away from the curb, obviously tailing them.

"Who're they?"

He zoomed in on the front of the car. "Federal plates. . . Now why would the Feds be interested in your files?"

"They must've traced the call from the hotel this morning. They sounded eager to help, only I wasn't sure it was a safe option. How'd they figure I was here?"

"No tracing necessary. Caller ID was all they'd've needed. And you did say you used your credit card for payment. Looks like they were beaten to the draw by Pockmark. I think they tailed him here. They just didn't know which apartment to target. Your hunch about distrusting the Feds was on the button. They didn't help us, and your fugitive status meant nothing to them. Think about it, Susan. Leland contacted the FBI and he was killed in an accident. The agent he'd spoken to was murdered." Vincent raked fingers through his hair, his eyes darkening. "Seems like someone in a high place wants you silenced. And they've chosen a rather risky route to get it done."

"So, when they realize it isn't us at the river, they'll come back."

Vincent thought about that. "Unless they just wanted the files, like Sloane-Wright. If they wanted to get you, they would've done it at the river. They've taken the pack. Perhaps now they're content to let others like Sloane-Wright or the cops deal with us. If it's the Feds, they wouldn't want to get their hands dirty." Vincent paused, thoughtful again. "They're probably checking the files now, confirming they've got what they wanted. And . . . they have pictures of me. See that camera the guy is holding? They're aware of exactly where you are by now and if they needed to, they would've come here by now."

"So Sloane-Wright and the police are still the danger?"

"I don't doubt that. Also as soon as word gets to Sloane-Wright about what happened out there tonight, Styles is going to be furious."

Her expression revealed her obvious question.

Vincent shrugged. "Styles isn't going to know much till tomorrow, hopefully. I'm not sure about the cops. Anyway, it's already late. I say we see the night through. Tomorrow, first thing you're out of here."

Vincent started Leland's recording and they watched in silence. Once again, he found himself riveted by the man who'd been little more than words from Susan's story. *A hero*, he thought. Despite the threat to his career and his life, he'd gone to extreme lengths to bring a heinous crime to light.

He looked at Susan, biting her nails as she watched and saw the obvious parallels there. *How easily she could end up like this man on the screen*, he thought. Leaving her to watch, Vincent rose and walked to the back of his lab. He knew every detail, already. Leland's presentation had at first been a brief recap of his suspicions, his explanation of the files. And then he made several startling revelations: Spiraling production costs of the high-tech SW500, had pushed Sloane-Wright to the verge of

bankruptcy. Only confirmed advanced orders from African governments reeling from the AIDS pandemic and the expected devastation from the apocalyptic strains would save them. This would make possible further production to meet future demand. But these governments had reneged on earlier promises to sign lucrative contracts with Sloane-Wright. South Africa was the first with the chant for free drugs or dirt cheap generics. It was a cry subsequently taken up by other Sub-Saharan nations. Styles had grossly miscalculated these nations' sense of responsibility to their citizens. South Africa being the prime example. Its erstwhile president Thabo Mbeki had persistently refused to believe that HIV caused AIDS. He courted dissidents who refuted the causal relationship between the virus and AIDS. Once, while visiting New York, President Mbeki had told reporters that he didn't know a single person who'd died of AIDS. He'd become known as an AIDS "denialist".

The next lucrative market for Sloane-Wright was the US and Europe. However, a plateau in new infections locally in the States meant a market in the doldrums. Styles' only hope lay in the sensational crisis that would be created by the expected arrival of the newer strains on both American and European shores. But this was projected to occur later than anticipated—much later than Sloane-Wright could afford. So . . .

"They actually went over to Africa, brought samples of the new HIV strains and intentionally released those strains locally to create a market for SW500?" Susan was incredulous. She'd finished the viewing and had followed Vincent to the back of the lab. "I find that hard to believe."

"I find this entire situation hard to believe. But . . . the proof is there. You've seen the e-mail correspondence between Styles and that doctor from South Africa's Medical Research Council. Styles convinced him that he needed samples of the mutant strains for research. They duped those guys into believing they represented the CDC."

Vincent snorted. "For the amount of money Styles offered, he didn't need to even pretend to be legit."

"But that's no different from terrorism. Genocide, even."

Vincent gave a bitter laugh. "You expecting morals and ethics from Sloane-Wright? You have no idea what they've already done in Africa. I do and I can believe virtually any evil they're accused of. It's a simple idea: a sensational new twist in the AIDS saga in these lucrative markets would cause an explosion in demand. In any case it's not far fetched. Big pharmaceuticals do stuff like this— in different ways— all the time. Take the simple case of intestinal ulcers, gastritis, and more seriously, stomach cancer: First world pharma giants make phenomenal profits with expensive drugs that offer only symptomatic treatment. We see these every day on TV adverts. The truth is that ninety-percent of these cases can be cured by antibiotics that cost a few dollars."

"*Helicobacter pylori*?"

Vincent nodded. "A simple bacterium occurring in the gut—found to be the leading cause of peptic ulcer disease and gastritis. Discovered in the early 1980's by Dr Barry Marshall, working with colleagues at Royal Perth Hospital in Australia. Pressure from the big guys suppressed his findings for years. They ridiculed him, cast aspersions on the validity of his studies and kept their markets open to this day by claiming the bacterium was a benign constituent of the normal GIT flora. Current statistics put the correct treatment— a blood test for accurate diagnosis of *H. pylori* infection and a few dollars worth of antibiotics— at a mere ten percent of the cases globally."

Susan added, "And if I remember correctly, current research at University of Virginia *H. pylori* Center, indicates that this treatment may also prevent many stomach cancers and some lymphoma tumors of the stomach."

"Exactly. But the general public remains mainly ignorant and continues

receiving symptomatic treatment for years.”

“I get your point: Create the demand, then supply the product.” Susan extended her lower lip, blew strands of hair away from her eyes. “God. If it hadn’t been for Dr Melnick, the truth about SW500 would never have come to light. I thought it was Leland who’d started it.”

“I knew him,” Vincent said. “A good man, always questioning, always aware.”

According to Leland, the first recruit for the SW500 project had been Dr Melnick who used to be a resident research physician with Sloane-Wright. Melnick had known all about the apocalyptic strains in Africa. He’d worked during the initial tests and production of SW500 prototypes. When he became aware of flaws in SW500 and the killing of trials patients he’d taken Leland into his confidence. Melnick had been involved in releasing the new strains locally among current HIV patients on the belief that all would be well once SW500 entered the market. The fear of what he’d unleashed without the prospect of a cure had given him an attack of conscience, and made him a marked man with Sloane-Wright. This goes some way to confirm our theory that there was a “patient zero”, Vincent.”

“Irrelevant now. As we speak the virus grows in stature with every new infection, rapidly building toward critical mass. Leland’s terror was understandable. The only person that can stop this thing is the president. She is directly involved, she’ll listen if she can be reached.”

Susan remembered something and a shadow crossed her eyes. “Run the part again where Leland mentions the president being on that hit list.”

They returned to the work station and Vincent found the scene:

Leland took a sheet of paper from his jacket pocket and held it to the camera. Against the background wind noise howling against the camera mike, he said, “. . . Due

to your unfortunate response to the treatment, you are on this hit list Madam President. The company doesn't know it is you. But Bentley does. And when Sloane-Wright inevitably discovers this, Bentley will be your angel of death. Though evil has no logic, this course of action is the logical progression of their evil. To them you would represent the most powerful voice against the treatment once you discover it is flawed. Remember, your position doesn't protect you in this situation. You are merely a patient, and therefore vulnerable as any other. Use your power to stop what is happening here. Get an investigation started right away . . . Only you can save my life . . ."

Vincent and Susan exchanged somber glances in silence. Then Vincent made a face. "The smell of blood on my clothes is driving me crazy. I'm going to have that shower now. In the meantime, you can check on the telephone recordings, see how our cloning relay chips work. Here, let me show you how to access the system."

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THERE WERE SEVEN files in chronological order. The first from someone called Beth to Carol Bentley. They spoke about Thanksgiving dinner the following week. Susan listened intently, forgetting the purpose of her task. The spirit of the conversation was festive, easy. It caught Susan off-guard, ambushing her with tears. Words of ordinary life, the mundane, the celebration of tradition—all as implausible now as her own dramatic predicament to an outsider.

Over the next few recordings, Susan was lost in her thoughts, barely listening. Then, at the familiar voice of the Chief on the next call, she grew alert once again. The Professor was calling from the hospital to tell his wife he'd be home for dinner. There'd been no mention of the visit by the "telephone company" man.

Next, a call about the Thanksgiving Dinner. There were three outgoing calls from the Bentley's, Thanksgiving the topic. And one that caused Susan's heart to jolt from its lulled state. It was by Bentley to the NYPD. He asked the dispatcher for Detective O'Hara. Was put on hold and then informed that the detective had left for the day. Bentley asked to speak to someone about the Dr Conner case. He was put on hold for almost a minute before a male voice came on the line. A detective Kowalsky informed Bentley that the case was now being handled by the FBI.

She was still mulling the information when a ringing startled her. It was another phone beside Vincent's security monitor. The LCD display of the linked answering machine flashed 3. She pressed PAUSE on the Bentley recordings and waited.

A young female voice came on after the tone— someone called Maddy. She sounded upset that Vincent hadn't been returning her calls since this afternoon. "Just

wanted to know what you're up to Baby. Remember we're meeting at Joe's tonight. Heard you were there earlier, with, like an older woman. What's that all about? Everybody's curious, loverboy. Most of all me," Maddy said with a giggle.

She let Vincent know exactly what he'd be missing out on later if he didn't meet her at Joe's: It was a naughty, explicit description of an erotic encounter which caused Susan to blush. Her hand involuntarily moved over to her neck where the skin had become hot, tingly.

She wasn't aware that Vincent had already entered the lab, that he'd been standing a few feet from her. Noticing him, she flushed deeply.

"Hey,"

"Hey," he replied.

Vincent sparkled in the recessed lighting of the lab. His hair was still damp from the shower, slicked back. He was wearing jeans, a white T-Shirt emblazoned in metallic silver, with the words *Scientists do it 'In Silico'*, and a straight face. He was about to say something when the phone rang again— and they both turned to it. It was the Bentley phone this time. Live. Red diodes flashed on the console.

"Styles," Vincent said, recognizing the caller's voice after Bentley's greeting.

There was a pause. Bentley's reply sounded annoyed, nervous. Styles asked if Bentley was performing his daily security sweep of the phone.

"Of course."

"Good, we can't take any chances." Styles replied.

There were no courtesies.

"When's your next trip to DC, Professor?"

"Tentatively Tuesday, Mr Styles. Why do you ask?"

Styles: "I need you at Sloane-Wright House tomorrow morning."

Bentley: "It's Sunday, for God's sake."

Styles: "It's urgent. We'll be an hour at the most, I promise. 8:30 A.M. sharp, Professor. Please don't disappoint me."

There was a click and the line went dead.

Susan and Vincent exchanged glances.

"Another point for you," Vincent said. "The visit to the lab could only mean one thing. They'll be preparing Bentley for his presidential visit."

It was Susan this time who was unconvinced. "Why the rush?"

Vincent shrugged. "Guess, they're in panic mode since you're on the run with their precious files. They're desperate to plug all the holes. You're another Leland to them." Vincent paused. "And, with that enormous a distraction in DC, it would be easier to continue their local operations quietly, without attention."

Susan was still doubtful. "Bentley wouldn't have the courage for that."

Vincent mused. "Not much of a jump. He's already an accomplice to the murders. And it would tie in with his purpose there. One of many untraceable toxins would do the trick. Spiking the vials would be the easiest thing. Bentley might not even be aware he was doing it."

She gave a nervous laugh. "He'd never get away with it. The treatment would be the first thing they'd suspect. And that would be much worse for Sloane-Wright."

"Unless they use an agent with delayed MOA, that'll act perhaps twelve, twenty-four hours later, then break down completely into naturally occurring elements. It's become the fashionable thing in the last few years."

She pondered his reasoning and then her green eyes widened.

"Yeah. You can only consider such scenarios if you truly know Sloane-Wright, and what they've been capable of in the past." Vincent's eyes darkened momentarily as

he remembered the night he'd been forced to do his deal with Styles. "All we have to do is alert the White House. That would entail revealing confidential information about the president. You okay with that?"

"Not if there's another way. And only if there is no other way."

He was thoughtful for a moment.

"Well, then, I guess that would depend on how well you know DC."

She flashed a quizzical look.

"Can you get around unguided— if it came to that?"

"Sure. I interned at Georgetown University Medical Center. One year. Then after Robert and I were married we often visited Washington either officially or on holiday. Why . . . if it came to what?"

"I think I have a plan," Vincent said.

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"ANOTHER ONE?"

Vincent ignored that. "It's gonna take a while to figure the details," he said and checked his watch. It was nearly ten. "In the meantime, you should get some shut-eye. Tomorrow you'll be in the capital awaiting my instructions."

As if on cue, Susan yawned, welcoming the time out. By now she needed the meds again. As she rose to leave, Vincent took her hand.

"Susan, wait. I was thinking . . . it's safer— logical— if you slept here in the lab. In case we get unwelcome visitors. This place is virtually undetectable if you don't know about it."

She scanned the place, looking disappointed. "Where?"

"There's a sofa next to the VR room in back."

She was hesitant. "But you've got the monitors to forewarn us."

Vincent didn't want to push it. "I guess."

HE WAS FACED with two tasks: Figuring out what to do once he got Susan to Washington, and finally beginning the search for SW500's problem. The syndrome presented a ticking time bomb in his city of eight million. Thousands out there were already spreading the infection unwittingly. He had to work fast.

The plan was to recruit Hymie. He felt confident his old friend from Brooklyn, who'd become a lawyer and made it into the White House, could take things from there. Failing that, getting Susan into the White House would take some doing. *Impossible*, he thought, especially in the post 9-11 era.

Sure, visitors toured the White House all the time. But they remained isolated from the real power precincts— where Susan needed to get to for her mission to be successful. He remembered his first time at the White House. He'd been a poor scientist then, on a weekend's break from Grant-Sinclair. "Everyone should get a chance to see the world's greatest government at work," Hymie had said.

The process was simple enough. Hymie had e-mailed a request for his personal details, which needed to be entered in the WAVES file. Hymie had made some quip about how he'd learned to communicate in ACSPEAK since coming to work in DC. That's "acronym speak", since every damn thing in the White House had been reduced to acronyms— MEMCON for memoranda of conversations, POTUS, for President of the United States, FLOTUS for First Lady of the US, FOIA, for Freedom Of Information Act, and WAVES— Worker And Visitor Entrance System— the clearing house program for visitors or guests, etc.

Early Saturday morning, they'd taken the Metro from Hymie's apartment in Cleveland Park to Farragut North. They entered Hymie's workplace, the Old Executive Office Building (which had since been renamed the Eisenhower Executive Office Building— EEOB), through the granite stairs on Pennsylvania Avenue. Vincent was like a kid with his first bike. Every moment a rush— the glorious cherry trees, the expansive Mall, the skyline-dominating Capitol. Then the line waiting for security clearance at the EEOB despite it being the weekend. And he'd got his first real life glimpse of Secret Service officers who, seated at an elevated desk, gave him the once over, checking ID, then clearing him into the complex.

Hymie had taken him through the tiny offices he and his workmates inhabited during the workday, then out of the EEOB through the West Exec exit across the small closed-off street (driveway, actually) and into the West Wing— the White House itself.

After that it'd been the most memorable experience of his life. His friend had pulled a few strings. And Vincent had gotten access to parts of the White House the public never got to see, like the Situation Room, for instance, the place where great wars have been strategized. Vincent had come to within a smelling distance of the Oval Office itself.

Then Hymie had led him quickly through the tour areas— The 'Color' Rooms— Red, Green, Blue— The China Room, Vermeil Room. That great day had been topped off with lunch in the White House Mess: French onion soup and Roast Beef sandwich. While Hymie remained nonchalant for most of that day, Vincent had sat there like a groupie gasping every time a bigwig walked by.

Vincent tried the number for his friend in DC— both on the landline and the cellphone— but only got Hymie's typical recordings. He left a message. He'd known it was a long shot. Hymie, the outdoors freak, spent weekends away, white water rafting in Virginia or hang-gliding in the country— a sport he'd introduced Vincent to, and which Vincent now pursued with passion. Only Vincent had taken to the extreme version— Urban Gliding— as its proponents called it. Vincent was part of an intrepid club— the Urban Gliders— that used limited wingspan "craft". Meeting twice each month mostly under cover of dark and on weekends when the authorities were usually in "sleep mode", they used their modified apparatus for the dangerous but adrenaline-charged practice of leaping off the top of city buildings and negotiating their way through the vertical-walled canyons down to the nearest landing site like a park or square. It was illegal, of course. And the group often eluded capture by the narrowest margins. But as an extreme sport, in many respects, the risks were part of the thrill.

Recalling his friend's recording, Vincent smiled. Typical Hymie: *Hi, I'm off the grid for the weekend. And if you knew what's good for you, you'd do the same . . .*

Firing a quick e-mail to his friend, tagging it as high priority, Vincent focused on his next urgent task: getting into the Sloane-Wright system to download the latest info on SW500. During his time there he'd helped them build the security of their intranet software, including the intelligent firewall. Unless there were changes, it would be a cinch, Vincent thought, as he activated his "gopher" scripts and instructed them to burrow into the Sloane-Wright cybervault.

IT WAS ALMOST 1:00 am when Vincent found Susan in his bed. That she'd chosen his bedroom figured, he thought. It was the one with the security monitors, and the best view of the street. He mused about how humans were no different from animals. This female of the species chose the best vantage point from which to sight predators.

He'd come to check on her and found signs of a battle: the bed linen in a snarl, half of which lay on the floor, her body curled in the fetal, deep in slumber, a baseball bat still clutched in her slender fingers. She'd selected one of his sleeveless vests pulled up to her full breasts, and boys-cut Calvin Klein panties. Vincent grinned, wishing she'd chosen the La Perla lingerie from his guest stash. A little payment for what he was doing for her, he thought. Still, this was good. In the flickering light of the monitors, her skin was pale eggshell porcelain. Vincent swallowed hard as he inhaled the slightly musky smell of the room, her body odor, her breath, mingled with shampoo and soap and—he sniffed the air—something else. He looked at her closely as she snored softly, purring like a cat. He was tormented by the need to touch her, feel her skin, curl up against her body— a need that blazed in his loins causing him to groan, and adjust himself. He watched her for several moments then chided himself for being a perv. His embarrassment from the earlier encounter with her came to the fore now. Flushing in the dark, he cursed himself in silence. *That's how it always was, wasn't it?* He had

everything he could wish for, but always never the thing he really wanted.

Maybe she thought he was a geek or too young for her. Christ, she looked hot. Feeling a vicarious need to get closer, he tiptoed over to the bed, but became petrified when she turned and looked directly at him.

He braced himself for the abuse. When none came, he realized her eyes were still closed. Approaching her, he bent down and lifted the comforter over her, tucking the ends under her chin. He ran his fingers through her hair. Then eased the baseball bat from her fingers. When he kissed her on her forehead, lingering over her face, he sniffed more than her musky odor. Wine, he thought and spotted the empty bottle on the floor by the bed. It was empty.

Vincent frowned. There was something else. A blister pack of Xanax tabs lay beside the empty bottle. The entire pack too, was empty.

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FROM THE MACHINE in the lab, he poured himself Starbucks coffee and resumed work on the SW500 program for a few more hours.

He was pleased. Despite the eventful day, he wasn't tired. His need for sleep had always been minimal. Often he'd sleep an hour or two then wakeup at night prompted by some dream or idea. He'd shuffle out to the lab, drawn to the computer, as though it were kin, a parent offering comfort. There he'd sit for hours bathed by its glowing countenance. *Comforting by electronic means*, Vincent would laugh to himself. But in truth, he'd never known true comforting. His gifted brain was like a parasite. It drew its needs from him but gave nothing in return. It fed and burgeoned as he grew up, but deprived him of dependency, of what he most needed from the time he'd been an infant. Even to his parents he'd appeared too mature, too intelligent to be just a kid. Instead of hugs and kisses they were always marveling, shaking heads in awe, unwittingly leaving him lonely. Genius had kept him aloof from those around him.

Was that what attracted him to her? he wondered. Was his aloneness, his need for comfort and love, making him fall in love with this 'older' woman?

As his fingers moved with the compulsive speed and confidence of a wizard, a master of cyberspace, he thought about what Susan had said, about placing him in danger by her coming here and he smiled, thinking how that wasn't the half of it.

He was no stranger to danger. If only she knew. He had a record. Not something he was proud of, but something he had to live with nonetheless. In the wake of his hypothesis, months after the night when Sarty had humiliated him, the FBI had burst into his apartment. He'd been living in a two-bedroom with Christian and Aunt Naomi

then. Someone had leaked to the FBI that he'd hacked into classified government sites during his research. They'd traced him. Impounded his computer, the first cluster-supercomputer he'd built from old salvaged PC's. The evidence was overwhelming. Computers never lie. And Vincent, with darker secrets to protect, had submitted. The judge had given him a suspended sentence and a hefty fine, because his attorney, the best hired by Sloane-Wright on his behalf, had pleaded in mitigation, showing the young scientist's transgressions were motivated by humanitarian goals.

He was not as savvy then about the cyberworld. Hadn't figured how to cover his tracks. Thankfully the FBI didn't know that he'd routinely use DOD processors to help with his decrypt programs. One time he'd snuck into NASA's Mars Project and reprogrammed the Spirit Rover's tasks, modifying the probe to be more time efficient.

How much worse it would have been had they gotten to know about the human experiments he'd been involved in, and how freely he still moved about in cyberspace. Since then, however, he'd created his own programs. These cloaked, 'invisible engines' of his waited and watched, hopping from one legitimate user to the next, riding piggy back through cyberspace. He could penetrate sites unhindered and withdraw without trace. But he knew the rapid evolution in the cyberworld meant he could never be certain he'd remain untraceable.

He'd never abused the system until this day, however. He was, in essence a 'white hat' hacker. He never harmed or stole from the systems he hacked into. He gleaned, mostly out of curiosity, mostly because passcodes and firewalls existed and he had to see if he could take up the challenge they presented to enhance his own skills. The same skills that once had found him the secret about the apocalypse strains.

Sometimes he dreamed he was the protector of the people. CyberSupe! What if another secret were hidden someplace? *People with gifts were the sentries of the race.*

Since Susan's arrival, though, his forays had been perilous. More so because he now had so much to lose if ever he was caught. So much had changed since his arrest. Susan had wondered about his wealth and he'd said nothing. Even his friends didn't know his real wealth. It's what kept people honest, he thought. They didn't know how he'd started Dime Cybertech— a company specializing in genomics and proteomic science, borne out of his expertise in bioinformatics— fields related to the identifying of genes and their functions in humans and other species; the study of proteins encoded by these genes, and how these proteins then directed the behavior of living cells.

Having had the jumpstart on most researchers with his CyberHuman project, Vincent had built up quite a reputation for identifying target genes associated with specific diseases. When he'd spotted a room full of obsolete Pentium computers that Sloane-Wright was discarding in favor of the new generation Multi-Core Intel processors, he'd asked Styles about that. Styles had literally let him have the whole pile of 'scrap' for a dime. Vincent had then built his supercomputer from the 'trash' and started up Dime Cybertech. He'd found a way to locate the target genes and catalogue their disease-related proteins— an idea that he'd sold to pharmaceutical companies with which Dime had formed loose alliances. In the last financial year, the first since its inception, Dime had earned a gross income of more than \$15 million, with projections set for double that figure in the current financial year.

That wasn't all. His online world, *DreamLife* had grown to a user base of almost a hundred thousand registered users, paying a fee of just \$5 per month. Add to this the revenues he amassed from trading real estate in other online worlds like Virtua Lab's *Alternate Life*, and South Korea's *Cyworld*.

Vincent had given a third of his profits to AIDS charities. There was so much more he could do for medical science. And there was Christian who depended on him.

So much rode on his actions. So much to lose. He tried not to think about the FBI's reaction if they discovered what he was doing and what he planned to do for Susan.

And there was still so much to accomplish before he even got close to solving the SW500 problem. Returning to the computer, he called up sequences and administered doses from Sloane-Wright's original and latest formulae. While he waited for the comparative responses from the CyberPatient's E-cells, he rechecked all experimental protocols then sat back.

One thing had become clear so far, providing Vincent with his biggest clue. The original batches (from when he collaborated with the company) worked, even in virtual time-progression trials they didn't deteriorate like the new batches from Sloane-Wright. He recalled his earlier concern: If Sloane-Wright couldn't figure the glitch how could he? Now he knew why. First of all he'd only sold the company his formulae and not his VICAP and VDP programs which were necessary for detailed retesting or retrospective studies of SW500. So, compared to their manual testing and comparisons to the original formulae, he could run his analyses in a fraction of their time. Also, Sloane-Wright's resources would be focused on one target only—the post production sequence: Get the drugs tested, approved, sold, rake in the cash, then search for the glitch.

Unless Styles or someone close to him in the company hierarchy became unwittingly infected with the virus. In that case, they'd probably revert to original batches which he knew they had to keep in storage as controls.

Vincent watched and waited. Within thirty minutes he saw the preliminary results emerge. A quick glance through the figures and Vincent's mouth went dry.

Nothing was certain, yet, in these early figures, but the results confirmed his worst fears. His forehead shone with sweat as he rose and headed for the spiral staircase that led to the roof. SW500 had veered so far of course he didn't know where to begin.

What he desperately needed was to clear his mind and really think.

Up on the roof, bathed in soft moonglow, he glanced at the props of his passionate hobby. Here beyond prying eyes, he kept his urban-gliding and para-gliding equipment. Despite the gravity of his problems, a smile broke at the corners of his mouth. He thought about the times he'd pull a daring stunt by jumping off this roof, navigating the precarious airspace between buildings to land at Joe's place.

Then growing earnest, he walked over to the parapet wall. Looking out into the night, he inhaled deeply the cool crisp air, focusing on nothing. Up here was his little patch of sky, a place to which he escaped whenever he had a problem. A place where his mind could really be at peace, left alone to do its own thing.

A place, far below which, at this very moment, events were being set in motion that would destroy that peace and change his life.

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DETECTIVE SEAN O'HARA was on the brink of rapture in a rare moment with the beautiful but volatile Carmen when the bedside phone rang. This was a once-a-month occasion when his wife had turned her attentions inwards to her own home, her own bed, yanked her husband from sleep in the early hours of this Sunday morning, swallowed him whole, and ridden him like a wild, bucking mare.

It was Ferry on the line. She sounded just as excited as he'd been a moment ago, said the Feds were off the case. That they had the location of the doctor. "It's now or never, Sean. We have to move."

"Ten minutes," O'Hara said, then turned to his wife whose face squirmed in ecstasy and anger. Moments like these he knew why Carmen did what she did and why he allowed it. She socked him on the jaw, swore as she slid off him and disappeared into the grimy bathroom of their cluttered one-bed walkup.

At the station house over coffee and doughnuts, Ferry brought O'Hara up to speed: "Feds gave us a name. Vincent Bach. East Village. Primary location was Pier 67. We found two corpses. John Does. Not Conner or Bach."

O'Hara ranted about the FBI's bad timing, broken promises, screwing up their investigation, etc. Then Ferry gave him the good news: "Relax, Sean. I know where they are right now. I've already dispatched a unit to the scene. They're staking the place out as we speak."

A STRONG BREEZE laced with river scent lifted Vincent's dark hair, long strands gleaming from the polar moon. His hands resting on the rough, icy parapet wall

stiffened, his thoughts clenched. His gaze had been drifting from the distance of his thoughts down the silver air to the lazy lulling grid of moving lights below, when something caught his eye. Traffic on the street was minimal at this hour causing the two cop cruisers, warning lights off, easing into no-parking spaces across the lobby of his building, to jerk him from his musings.

He thought about the empty wine bottle, the Xanax pills.

“Oh shit. Oh Jesus, Susan,” he cried, starting for the stairs, cursing himself for having taken his eye off the ball.

62

IN THE PREDAWN darkness, two police cruisers entered East 7th Street from the Avenue C side. Minutes later, they were backed up by another cruiser and a police truck. Sans fanfare, they glided through the rising steam of the street. Detective O'Hara emerged from the lead vehicle with Ferry in tow. He ordered his men to set up the klieg lights, directing what appeared to be a billion candlepower's intensity on the penthouse, turning night into day.

FROM HIS LIVING room window the luminescent fog billowed like giant diaphanous drapes, unreal as a movie set. The muted twinkling of downtown lights, the veiled fluorescence of streetlamps and beneath them the wraithlike figures converging on his lobby, so film noir. "Cosmic," he whispered. "Overkill, but cosmic."

O'Hara's rumpled suit exited the elevator in a cloud of must and tobacco hardly mitigated by his female partner's day-old musk. The detective had introduced himself with his credentials via Vincent's camera downstairs. The exchange had been curt with Vincent already putting into play the act he'd decided upon:

"Do you have a search warrant, Officer?" He'd said

"Hell, I don't need a goddamned warrant, Bach, but I can rouse a judge and have one here in thirty minutes if you insist. That would indicate that you're being uncooperative for some reason. And you're gonna like me a whole lot less after you make me and the grumpy judge go to all that trouble. We believe you're harboring a fugitive. Know what that means? Hindering Prosecution in the first degree. A criminal offence. I could quote you the section of the Penal Law if you ain't convinced."

From behind O'Hara's cloud, four uniforms spread out into Vincent's foyer. Ferry came up alongside him. O'Hara patted down the suit he'd been wearing all week. His stubble was a deep shadow over which the wisps of grey floated like glitter.

As a caution, Vincent stood just beyond the range of the gimbaled floor, his finger poised over the remote control inside his pocket. His hair was ruffled. He wore a paisley gown, slippers. Yawning, he rubbed his eyes. The uniforms had their hands poised at their holsters, eyes darting about the place.

Vincent resumed the conversation exactly from where it had ended via the intercom, "You're mistaken, Officer. I'm all alone. And this is an unearthly hour to be waking a good citizen. Couldn't you come back later, at a more respectable time?"

O'Hara's ruddy face darkened. He exchanged glances with Ferry, his crew and stepped toward Vincent and glared down at him.

"This is part of an urgent homicide investigation. Either you want to cooperate like a *good citizen* or not. You want to cooperate, don't y— ?"

O'Hara turned. Through the wide, brightly lit arch he spotted the debris spilling out of the lounge behind Vincent. He started toward it. "What in God's name?"

Ferry and the crew formed a small semicircle at the fringes of the mess.

Vincent edged back and stood in their way. "Just a wild party, Detective. Did the neighbors complain? Is that why you're really here?"

O'Hara grunted. Ignoring Vincent, he turned to Ferry and gestured expansively. "All in plain sight, we don't need no warrant for this."

Three of the uniforms fanned out through the penthouse. The fourth stood guard over Vincent. O'Hara held up a photo of Susan.

"Do you recognize this person?"

"The doctor on the news." Vincent frowned. "What about her?"

"Is she here?"

"Are you kidding?"

O'Hara gestured for Vincent to follow him as they navigated the ruins. Ferry spotted the noose, picked it up, cocked an eyebrow at her partner.

"Call in Crime Scene?"

"Not yet." He kept moving, gun in hand now. In the kitchen, he indicated the wine glasses and trays. Ferry reached for her own gun under a grey linen blouse over black slacks. "Two glasses, two plates, two people. I'd say you have company, Bach."

"*Had*, Detective. A friend, earlier this evening."

"Enough DNA and prints here to ID that friend," Ferry said.

Vincent remained silent.

In an en-suite bathroom, Ferry pointed out the used makeup, the empty box of hair tint and the blond strands in the sink.

"You can do this the hard way or the easy way, Bach."

Vincent shrugged.

The detective grabbed the lapels of his gown. "It's a seven-year stint in prison for aiding and abetting in a homicide. You wanna be a hardass? See how you like being one when you're the personal squeeze of Mr Big-and-Hairy at Riker's."

Vincent held up a palm in truce. "Look, Dr Conner's a friend. She came to me for help. But she's innocent. I swear . . . I gave her a place to rest for a while. But she took off earlier tonight just before some nasty types came here looking for her. They meant business. As you saw out there, I'm lucky to be alive."

O'Hara turned to the uniforms who entered the kitchen. "Anything?"

They shook their heads. "Place is clean."

"Let's do this one more time," O'Hara said and started at the Foyer again. He

shook his head at the size of the apartment. "You a drug dealer, Bach?"

Vincent chuckled. "You could say that."

O'Hara bunched his jaw muscles and reached for him. Ferry put a hand on her partner's elbow. She whispered something in his ear.

O'Hara nodded. "Where were you around seven this evening?"

"Joe's Diner on Lafayette, having supper."

"We found two bodies at the river. Pier 67. We have witnesses claim they saw both you and the doctor there at just after seven. You left the scene in a hurry . . ."

"Is there a question somewhere in there, Detective?"

"Yeah. Mr Hardass. First question: What do you think we'd find if we tested your hands for gunshot residue and if we found a murder weapon, checked prints and matched slugs? Second: Can you picture yourself being holed up in a tiny cell night after night with Mr Big and Hairy?"

Vincent swallowed. Looked away, doubtful he could sustain the bravado and buy Susan any more time. He wiped the fine sweat from his upper lip. The detectives' stares discomfiting him, making him relive the scrutiny of the implacable FBI agents as they confiscated his computers, as the judge handed down his sentence. Bile rose at his throat, bitter saliva filling his mouth. *I just killed two men and they can prove it. If Susan is captured, if it ends here tonight, it's life in prison for me.*

"Th- those were the two guys who came after Dr Conner. Th- they—" *Christ, Susan. Are you done drinking the strong black coffee? Why in hell did you take all that stuff?* It had been a nightmare trying to wake her, get her to sober up. He pictured her slumped in her drugged stupor, helpless, waiting to be captured. Still, he couldn't risk antagonizing this cop any further. "They're the ones who trashed this place. We came back and they were waiting. They jumped us —"

A uniform burst in holding up a plastic bag. "Detective, check this out . . ."

O'Hara studied the bloodstained clothing and sneakers. He grinned at Vincent.

"Save the rest for your confession, Bach. Read him his rights. Call Crime Scene."

As they led a manacled Vincent out to the foyer, Ferry held out a hand.

O'Hara frowned. "What?"

"The elevator's located midway of the building . . . see?"

O'Hara scratched his chin stubble. After a long time he said, "Yeah . . . yeah.

Where's the missing space, Bach?"

THEY SEARCHED THE lab. O'Hara was convinced Vincent ran a sophisticated drug factory. He spied the spiral staircase in back and motioned to the uniforms.

Past the hang-gliding equipment in transparent heavy duty plastic, the detective saw a rectangular upright structure which didn't make sense to him. But the gangplank launch platform jutting from the parapet wall, the lone sneaker and canvas backpack discarded beside the platform did. *Someone leapt off this platform in a hurry*, he thought incredulous. He glared back at the gliding equipment, then at Vincent who gave a helpless shrug. Both detectives rushed to the edge of the building now. They scanned rooftops, the sky, the street.

Ferry radioed downstairs to check all fire-escapes and alleys while O'Hara grabbed Vincent. "No way, Bach. Not through this fucking maze of buildings—"

"Unless—" Ferry pointed to a name emblazoned on a clipped-wing section of a glider. "She'd been helped by one of the elusive and lawbreaking *Urban Gliders*."

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SUSAN'S HEART THUDDERED in slow-time. It was happening all over again: the hunt, the terror. Once again, she had to keep moving. Continuous motion to stay alive. No time for rest with the monster snapping at her calves.

Predawn Manhattan floated past in a muted blur. She was in limbo, everything surreal, slow moving, like a world through night vision glasses- a green and ghostly alien gloaming.

Barely aware of the helmet and leather jacket Vincent had slipped on for her, she was terrified of every police cruiser that passed. Vincent's Harley too was suddenly too big, too precious as her getaway ride. She remembered little of his frantic expression as he'd tried to rouse her, practically dressed her- the jeans, jacket, socks, sneakers- had stuffed cash, a cell phone, into her pockets, continuously whispering into her ears: "Just remember Joe's. Go straight there. I'll explain everything online. The lab's no good to hide in. Cops'll figure out the space issue. They deal with drug dealers who have secret rooms used as dope factories. Don't call, whatever you do. Not until you're in Washington and not unless it's an emergency. Joe'll arrange an ID, in case they're staking out the airports. Drink all this coffee. Ride slowly."

He'd left her in the basement garage, given her the remote and rushed back upstairs. Eventually, she'd burst out onto 8th Street. "Go right on Avenue C," Vincent had said, "Then right again until Second Avenue. You'll know your way from there."

Before slipping on her helmet he'd kissed her on the lips- a quick kiss- and smiled. "Godspeed, Susan. Till we meet again."

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THEY FLUNG HIM into a skanky holding cell with some rough types, most of whom were asleep on benches and the floor. The station house was busy, a skeleton crew of late night grumpy cops processing the Saturday night's haul. Nobody even looked his way from outside the cage. Vincent slumped down in a corner against the bars and spent what was left of the night inhaling the piss and vomit of his new bedfellows. At 7:00 A.M. the next morning he was allowed his one phone call.

Old man Benko, himself, from Cohen, Bernstein and Stone, pitched up in golf clothes. Still shackled and seated on a wooden bench upstairs, Vincent watched Benko conferring with a young Assistant DA who looked really put out this Sunday morning. Vincent guessed it was this young DA's turn to wear the weekend beeper in the District Attorney's Office, and his misfortune at being called out so early. The ADA shifted from one foot to another, looking eager to get back to the last dregs of his weekend.

After fifteen minutes of moving mouths and heads, Benjamin Cohen approached Vincent. "Here's the deal: You're free to go . . . for now. On condition you provide all the info they want on some fugitive doctor." The lawyer gave Vincent a look. "Don't have a wink in hell of a clue what this is about, Son, and I don't have to right now. Murder, harboring a fugitive, dope-dealing, dope manufacture, Urban Gliders- you're having a damn fine time with all that money of yours, aren't you?" Benko chuckled, giving Vincent a nudge at the shoulder. "Just remember the magic words, however, 'full cooperation'. It's what's getting you out . . . Now, if you'll excuse me, young man, I've got to finish breakfast and tee-off in thirty minutes. You take care and ring me if the *Schutzstaffel* come callin again." He made a phone gesture. "Heart to heart

tomorrow— Oh, and don't leave town." He chuckled again. "Otherwise we'll have to endure that stench once more."

As Vincent left the station, he smiled to himself. The ease with which he'd gotten his freedom wasn't lost on him. It was the oldest trick in the book. They would watch him now, closely, hoping he'd lead them to Susan.

THE FIRST TIME he presented his working hypothesis to Sloane-Wright's R&D panel, he'd used the crude prototype microprobes developed in conjunction with the folks at MIT. Computers converted signals from the imaging systems on these nanomachines into epic visuals of the body's microenvironment.

The probes delivered the genetic therapy to the cells infected with viral particles. Vincent had awed them with real time destruction of viral particles within the live vegetative-state human subject.

This morning in his VR cube, as he booted up the system, he wondered why he'd never conducted regular follow-ups with the SW500 samples Sloane-Wright had been sending him. His processor's speed was generations faster than when he'd developed the therapy. He now had the computational power of around three hundred teraflops or three hundred trillion floating point operations per second meaning he could conduct a full SW500 test in less than an hour rather than several hours.

Calling up Christian's latest blood analysis files, he loaded the data into the CyberChris simulator— the virtual equivalent of his brother's genetic blueprint.

Effectively, this was the Chris clone on which Vincent tested his brother's cellular responses to the newest batches of simulated SW500. The last test Vincent had conducted months ago had shown Chris's body to be virtually HIV free. Even now he marveled at what the therapy had achieved. The best conventional antiretroviral

treatments of the day would require sixty to a hundred years of daily dosing of a patient to achieve a one hundred percent elimination of viral load. Something SW500 had achieved in less than a year. Vincent knew there'd still be renegade strips of viral genome potentially capable of regenerating new viruses within Chris's blood. In its current form, SW500 was no short term treatment. Indeed there might still be whole viral particles, though at levels too low to matter. Unless they'd been allowed to replicate unchecked by a failing therapy

The shocking results he'd seen earlier had left him pessimistic about Chris's chances. Yet he prayed for a small miracle that his brother was still all right. Strapping himself into the 3D-rig, he slipped on DataGloves and the 360-degree-view headset mounted with the digital video display and earphones.

He spent the next fifty minutes journeying through his brother's virtual body. After checking every nook and cranny of Chris's system, dodging hurtling red blood cells and vicious macrophages which prowled the body for foreign particles, Vincent emerged flushed and deeply troubled.

It wasn't until he read the subsequent computer analysis that his concern became fear. And the fear turned to futility.

65

A LAMB TO the slaughter. It's how Carl Bentley felt when he arrived at Sloane-Wright House, on the green fringe of the city. Set in rolling verdant park-like grounds, the buildings were of a postmodern, futuristic design. Glass biospheres and august walls of aluminum and gray granite gleamed in the morning sun. The SW logo above the entrance— a four-storey glass portal— was an S whose upper loop flowed into the running double U's of the W. All fashioned in matte silver-gray edged with chrome and embossed on a single lilac orchid.

Carl Bentley loathed the place. The first time he'd been summoned here was a day after Dr Melnick's 'accidental' death. David Melnick (the lamb before Leland and a complex, hard to fathom character) had been Bentley's second-in-command in the CRU. As a former Sloane-Wright physician, Melnick was expected to tow the company line no matter what. But he'd been the first to notice the SW500 relapses and refused to continue administering the therapy unless the glitch was addressed. Melnick was tortured by the ethics behind the cover up and had literally gone berserk with Bentley who'd urged him to be patient.

Bentley remembered his confession to Styles about his deal with Larry Myers and he wondered whether he would be the next to suffer an accident. By the time he was led up to Styles' office he was trembling. Sweat ran down his armpits and he felt the occasional palpitation in his chest. This was undoubtedly part of the lethal ritual-making him walk to his own death. They could take him any time they wished, like they did with the others. They could also destroy his family while he watched- a fate worse than death. Which is why he chose to come.

Dressed in his trademark gray suit with pale gray shirt and tie, Styles grinned from behind his monumental desk as Bentley entered the office.

"Ah, Professor, thank you for coming at such short notice."

Bentley grunted, muttering something about the devil desecrating the Sabbath.

"Dangerous times necessitate urgent action." Styles indicated a plush visitor's chair and came around to take Bentley's hand. "With so much to lose, it's time for precautions. The prodigal doctor and the White House issue— your little bombshell— top my list of concerns."

Bentley raised a hand, started to speak. But Styles waved it away.

"No further explanations necessary. I understand fully why you had to accede to the White House request. I would've done no different in your place . . ."

Bentley felt his spirit rise for a moment.

"However, be that as it may, that issue has indeed caused some dire problems for us. There is an opportunity, though, for you to make amends, Professor . . ."

Bentley adjusted himself on the seat. "A most welcome gesture, Mr Styles," he said, almost wanting to burst into tears. "I'll do anything." Bentley's armpits under the jacket were soaked and dripping now.

"I suggest you begin by giving me the details of your White House visits."

Bentley was puzzled. "You want to hear about the president's treatment?"

"Indulge me, Professor. How the visits are set up, how you get into the White House, etc. I'm intrigued by the thought of it all."

Though trembling, Bentley was mildly amused by the fact that Styles had made the same mistake about the White House visits as he had when he'd first been invited to treat the president.

"Well . . ." Bentley began . . .

As Bentley neared the end of his narrative, Styles buzzed his assistant, requesting refreshments. Minutes later she entered—a cliché on high heels—tall, sexy, blonde, with a cleavage and butt that snagged Bentley's eye and held it while she served him Earl Grey Tea with honey.

"Why, thank you," he said, knowing he ought to know better than to ask how they knew what his favorite beverage was. He instantly brought the cup to his lips, though, grateful for the one thing that always calmed his nerves.

Within a minute of drinking the Mickey, Bentley passed out, his chin dropping to his chest, his deep breathing turning into a snore.

Styles buzzed his assistant again. "Ariana? Send the boys in."

Two white-coated attendants entered the room. They transferred Bentley to a gurney and wheeled him to a room called Derm Lab 1. The room was on a floor of the building dedicated to the research and development of both synthetic and genetically-engineered human skin.

The attendants placed Bentley on a sophisticated, modified dentist's chair. After intubating him, they administered a mild anesthetic gas until he was deep enough for the procedure they were about to execute. Working with practiced efficiency and speed, the team of two technicians fashioned a precise mold of Bentley's face. First a physical mold was made using a hydrophilic, high-memory silicone paste. Second a True-Form 3-D laser scanner was used to create a 'wire-frame' replica of Bentley's face on a nearby computer display.

Within forty-five minutes the techs deposited Bentley in a lounge adjoining Styles' office where they revived him. One of Styles' resident medics remained at Bentley's side and answered Bentley's perplexed look when he came to.

"Your BP took a dive, Professor. But your vitals have all bounced back quite

nicely. Looks like an innocuous case of syncope at this time. Perhaps you should schedule a visit to your private physician to rule out any problems. Stress is hell on the body as you know.”

After a further cup of Earl Grey Tea, a bewildered and somewhat disoriented and disbelieving (of his live status) Bentley was sent on his way.

Two hours later Styles stepped into Derm Lab 1. A technician pointed to a computer monitor, showing Styles two faces displayed there. One of the faces was a replica of Bentley’s, the other a slightly wider, more tanned one was Roman’s.

“Sir, the trial dermal mask is ready for viewing. The structural integrity is being maintained with the silicone hybrid. The final mask of Subject 1 (Bentley) will be ready within hours. This product employs synthesized collagen for the structural integrity and the interface for the facial topography of the second subject, the recipient. When ‘grafted’ over the face of Subject 2 (Roman) the product will maintain elasticity and oxygen saturation for a period of eighteen to twenty-four hours. This, via slow-release oxygen-rich microgranules. However I must add the cultured skin is unstable- no guarantees. We’re lucky– not only in that they are both similar in build– the recipient’s facial symmetry and underlying bone structure are not too dissimilar. It will be impossible to tell the difference between the subjects, Sir.”

Styles nodded, his single eye gleaming with enthusiasm. He gestured for the attendant to leave, before stepping into an adjoining room. Here, bathed in the soft incandescence of recessed lighting, he smiled in satisfaction at Roman who’d been fitted with the trial mask. Down to the hairline and epidermal pores on his face, it was impossible to tell the difference between Roman and Bentley.

66

ON SUNDAY EVENING in a plush suite at the Hyatt Regency in New York, Roman sat on a deep brown wingback chair coughing and sputtering. He never smoked or drank, not since his days with the FBI. But this evening he was in good spirits— and slightly insane, he thought.

Ordinarily he'd never go anywhere near a job this big. But these clowns had made it so easy, all he had to do was set up a drip, a procedure they'd drilled into him for hours until he felt he could do it blindfolded. Then he had to add the contents of a vial at the port that led into the tube running down into the president's arm. He had no idea what it was, and he didn't care as long as it did what it was supposed to do. He'd make enough moola at the end of this deal to be able to live several lifetimes like a king. And he was in no danger. The toxin would kill long after he'd left the scene.

A walk in the park really, but the idea of performing the ultimate contract *was* the thing. So he'd ordered a magnum of the hotel's best champagne and toasted his health, drinking only half a glass. And he'd lit one of the cigars that Styles had given him as a parting gift.

Coughing, sputtering, he wiped tears as smoke caught at his throat. He laughed. Even danced a jig. Then glanced at his watch, as he'd done for the last few hours holed up here. Beside the bed was the overnight bag ready for the flight. They'd asked him to wait, to be ready to leave for DC at a moment's notice over the next twelve hours.

SUSAN HAD SLEPT the better part of the morning and into early afternoon in the apartment above Joe's. Waking at 2 P.M., she was just as bewildered as the previous

morning at the *Journey's End*. Another day, another room, but the disbelief, the pain, and the dull sense of loss were the same. How she ached for normalcy, for her apartment, for her life. All she could do was steel herself against the misery. She shut her eyes and thought of Vincent, about how he'd saved her life, believing firmly that he would come through for her on his promises— to find the glitch, to protect Laura as he'd done her. It was the last thing she'd asked of him as she'd hurriedly left his apartment in the early hours. This was the dream she clung to.

Now, as sleep withdrew from her body, the demon came at her again. Its claws dug into her stomach, tore up her insides. The cramps were worsening every day, the craving become deeper, wilder. Her skin crawled, itching in places she couldn't reach. She yearned for her intravenous narco doses. The pills were becoming a joke.

She curled up on the bed as the pain pulsed behind her eyeballs. Scanning the room for something, she slid off and crawled to the chair where Vincent's biking jacket lay. A fevered gasp and she began laughing hysterically when she found the stash in the pocket. So, her final detour to Vincent's kitchen was no hallucination.

She lay on the bed another thirty minutes before scanning the room: the faded brown drapes, the old wood cupboards, the note against the mirror:

Dear Susan,

Online shopping makes life so easy.

Enjoy, and let me know if there's anything else.

Vincent.

A shadow crossed her eyes. Even though she'd seen him less than twelve hours ago, it felt as though an age had passed. With a deep sense of loss, she reached for the note and read it one more time.

On the dresser stood a bulging Estee Lauder cosmetics bag. On the floor were

shopping bags— the anticipation of what she'd find there enough to buoy her spirits. She found underwear, jeans, a chambray blouse and T-shirt, sneakers, baseball cap, a bracelet-style wristwatch, even a chic beret for camouflage and a gray cashmere scarf. In the DKNY suit bag, thrown on the back of a chair was a camel pantsuit with belt, matching pumps and dark brown holdall handbag. In the second suit bag, she found a black lightweight topcoat. Next to this was an overnight travel bag. Susan shook her head, amazed. "Thank you, Vincent," she whispered.

She showered before changing into sneakers, jeans, T-shirt. She packed her overnight bag, leaving out only the topcoat for outdoor use. Around 4:30 P.M. she buzzed Joe downstairs. He brought up toasted sandwiches and a pot of coffee, offering to get her something from the bar if she wished. She politely declined. "Last thing I need right now, considering my low threshold for alcohol."

Joe smiled. "Been a change of plans. I didn't wanna wake you just for that. You'll be leaving much later than agreed. So eat up. I'll tell you more in a while."

As she dug into the food, he slipped away to an adjoining room and she heard typing on a keyboard. Twenty minutes later, just as she was finishing her coffee, Joe returned. "If you're done," he gestured for her to follow him to a small study with a computer. "Vincent is waiting to chat with you online."

Joe clicked a few keys and said, "There's a TV, books, mags in the "den". Buzz if you need anything. Enjoy."

She looked at the screen.

VINCENT: Hey Susan, rest well? How you holding up?

She typed: Great under the circumstances. Thanks for the goodies. You sure know how to make a woman happy.

It took a few moments for the reply.

VINCENT: My pleasure.

SUSAN: How are you? No problems with the police?

VINCENT: Nothing I couldn't handle.

SUSAN: Good. What's with the change of plans?

VINCENT: Yeah. Okay. Remember our uncertainty about the assassin/ assassination?

SUSAN: Yep.

VINCENT: Well, we know Bentley is flying up to DC Tuesday. Plus the visit to the lab sort of clinches things. Still, I'm not sure. Bentley's a doctor, not an assassin. So, after a hunch, I decided to let my trusty "electronic assistant" run a check for any tickets to DC booked through Sloane-Wright. I found two: One Sunday night, two hours after your flight, and another Monday morning. It's a long shot but I thought who better than you to ID this guy if indeed he's on the Sunday flight. If not you can wait at "Arrivals" Monday morning to check if he's there. No fear, you won't be recognized now that you've "changed". You up to something like this?

Susan shook her head. *Oh no. How could he even ask.* She couldn't imagine ever having the courage to be in the same place as the killer, even if she couldn't be recognized. She stared at the screen, unsure how to respond. She'd committed herself to seeing this through no matter what. Now she was being tested.

VINCENT: I understand if you aren't. It's just that by now Sloane-Wright believe you're here with me. (There's a suspicious van out front. Been there since noon today. Reg. number traces back to ProSecure— Sloane-Wright) So if my hunch pans out— if he even looks you in the eye, he's never going to make the connection.

Susan knew Vincent was right. And this way if it did pan out, it was exactly what they wanted. She breathed deeply: Sure. I'm up to it. Just needed a moment.

VINCENT: Cosmic. In anticipation I'd already booked you on that later flight. Meanwhile try to go over everything I told you. Visualize the game. Fear is the thief of confidence. Remember that. And be careful.

Two hours later her cab was waiting downstairs. Joe gave her a slim nylon pouch containing her fake ID (Cynthia Holmes) and tickets for the later flight.

ARRIVING AT THE airport, she was gripped by a kind of agoraphobic anxiety as she

stepped from the cab out into the open. Then she was inside the airport and lost in crowds, the beret and topcoat suddenly not large enough to hide her. She saw police everywhere, security beefed up ever since the terrorist attacks of 9-11.

It wasn't the police that scared her anymore—just the thought that the killer could be here somewhere. She studied the crowds closely in the boarding area and not seeing the killer, breathed a sigh of relief. The irony was that after a while, her relief became tempered by disappointment. If she spotted the killer, their theory was sound, and she knew her mission would mean something.

Then she was on the plane and facing another disappointment. The flight was delayed for over thirty minutes due to a piece of unattended baggage in the terminal building. She surveyed as much of the cabin as she could from her seat. It was one of those flights, the aircraft only half full, with passengers able to mill about, stretch out in comfort. Beside her the seat was vacant, but she became hot, claustrophobic as the aircraft droned on while grounded like a nesting bird. She imagined the killer seated behind her watching her.

The sweat broke out on her forehead. She'd wanted to be strong for Vincent, for herself, but now she wasn't so sure. *Lord it was hot.* Removing her beret, she ran fingers through her hair. These minutes to herself were the hardest. She was restless, the events of the previous day and night returning in unbidden flashes. She needed to use the loo. Though she was seated toward the back of the plane, she decided to use the toilets up front so she could check out the passengers. Curiosity overrode a good portion of her dread as she rose to leave, pulling the beret over her hair once again.

On her return, eyes averted, she tried discreetly to check out the passengers. Her heart thudded so hard her eyes blurred with each beat. As she got closer to her seat she experienced a curious mixture of disappointment and immense relief.

That's when it happened.

The sense of it was there, in the air like the promise of rain, the crackle of ozone from a distant electric storm— something in the stuffy atmosphere of that grounded plane. Something that reminded her of Eileen, a flash in her mind's darkness of Eileen's awkward body sprawled and twisted in its dark pool of blood, her lifeless eyes.

That perfume. The barest hint of citrus and wood. It conjured a crimson, cloying fog, causing her to turn and study the row of seats she had just passed. He was close— on the aisle, appearing at the periphery of her vision. Her knees lost resistance, her muscles nearly liquid, an effort to remain standing. She couldn't bear to look at his face, her gaze low, searching for the one thing that would erode her disbelief. His left hand was spread over the right on his lap, his eyes closed. There was no way to know if there were missing fingers or not. But her intuition, bolstered by Vincent's hunch, had already set the adrenaline on her tongue, its coppery taste like poison.

How she made the last few rows to her seat was a miracle. Breathing heavily, her face pale, she fell into her seat and immediately buzzed the stewardess.

Scotch, double, straight up.

It was a crucial mistake.

The alcohol moved like glowing liquid coal through her bloodstream, tracing its stream of fire, congealing thoughts, memories, setting her down on a bed of quicksand.

There was a sensation of moving, vibration, falling, weightlessness, rising. The pilot was talking above the haze . . . Ladies and gentlemen . . . cruising altitude . . . Her hand on the buzzer, the stewardess, another Scotch on the rocks, the easy heat settling into something warm and comfortable. And then, she couldn't tell at which point she became aware of it. But the seat beside her did not feel empty any longer. Her elbow stopped at something there. But she could not look. She did not look. Reality seeped

like molasses through her mind. He was on the plane, the orderly, the killer: Two Fingers. Now he was beside her.

Vincent's move to turn the tables on their enemies had been too bold. Now he'd come to her. She'd seen the movies, read the books: A knife, a needle, a silenced gun made of undetectable material smuggled within the individual parts of a laptop, a camera, a PDA, a child's toy— assembled in seconds and pressed at her side. Who will know? And she'll be dead.

Maybe it would be for the best, then. She'd never had the courage to take her own life and end her tortured, scarred existence.

Nate, oh Nate, my baby. How she missed him, his blond curls, the dimple in his cheek, like Robert's, his warm smell in the middle of the night or early mornings as he squeezed between her and Robert, scared from some nightmare. Maybe they'll finally be together on the other side of this dimension we called life. She'd never been religious, never believed. How could a loving God have cast these tragedies in her life? But her tentative peace had only come through the belief that her loved ones had passed to another place where they awaited her for an eternal reunion.

Through the haze, she heard the pilot once again. The plane was making its descent for DC. She was still alive but going deeper into the quicksand, the warm brown particles passing her on her way down. The stranger in the seat beside her was talking and she suddenly realized she wasn't getting that frightening scent. Stealing a discreet sidelong glance she noticed it wasn't Two-Fingers. This guy was handsome, in a rugged way. Turning to look at him, she was greeted by a warm smile and the welcome fragrance of drugstore aftershave.

He asked questions, his voice like molasses, mellow, soothing—a warm hollow in beach sand on a chilly day. He was flirting, complimenting her, saying things that

made her feel good. She'd never felt sexy in such a long time. How special he made her feel. Just having someone friendly right now meant so much. She didn't want to be alone, not with Two Fingers so close. She knew it was the alcohol speaking, hysteria too, but she patted the stranger's arm, chided him for being such a shameless flatterer—the beret making her look like a French beauty. What nonsense. Then she was laughing, asking the stewardess for more Scotch, another double straight up and she was saying unbelievable things. He, too. And she could feel her thighs rubbing together, growing warm and full, nullifying a teasing itch where she'd felt little in such a long time.

In a little while they were on the ground, the plane taxiing to a stop. She spotted Two Fingers rising, lifting the overhead compartment, retrieving his bag. And there, the two stumps where his middle fingers ought to be.

Sobering fear sliced through her belly. Mike beside her. Is that what he'd said his name was, the handsome, sexy stranger, who'd made her squeeze her own bottom in her seat? Now he was asking where she was staying, could he buy her dinner, a late dinner? And she couldn't understand what the hell had given him the idea that she'd ever go out with a stranger. God she was drunk. How stupid. What had Vincent said? *Fear was the thief of confidence.* She thought to correct that fancy notion. *Fear was the friend of desperation and foolishness.*

She said something- whatever- to put off the stranger— Mike— politely, her eyes only on Two-Fingers now as he moved down the aisle. She felt unsteady on her feet. How the hell would she be able to watch him, follow him, try to get an idea of what he was up to in this condition?

67

SUSAN CURSED HERSELF for the drinks. Despite her rising fear and the corresponding adrenaline high, her mind remained cloudy, unfocused— a foggy daze. The moment she exited the airport however, the blast of icy biting night air shocked her, and rationality began making tentative grips on her consciousness.

Beside her, Mike the stranger appeared unshakeable and her annoyance grew as he hung on like a bad rash. She tried her best to put him off: “I’m really flattered. But I’m meeting my husband at the hotel. Sorry.”

“I’m not buying that,” he obdurately said. “Where’s the ring then?”

It brought on an immediate pang of guilt. Out of habit she reached for her ring and thought of Robert. It was the worst thing the stranger could have said.

“No really. I am married. The ring just became tight— inevitable I guess.”

“At least let me share a cab with you into the city. DC’s dangerous after dark.”

“I can take care of myself, thanks.”

Something about her tone caused Mike to back up. He put his hands in the air.

“Okay, alright. No need to get nasty. I was just trying to be nice.”

She wilted a little at the hurt expression on his face.

“Oh all right, you can hail me a cab, then. But that’s all.”

All the while her gaze remained on Two Fingers who, like her, hadn’t stopped for luggage. She’d watched him head out of the building with an overnight bag and board a cab.

She turned to Mike. “I’m in a hurry.”

He hailed a cab, helped with her bag, watched her get in and bid her adieu.

"Follow that car," she said to the driver, a little slurred, a little out of breath and pointing to the cab ahead.

The cabby hesitated for a moment. "Ya kiddin me." When he saw her earnest expression, he beamed. "Lady, I been waitin my whole life ta hear somebody say those very words." With that he sped away from the curb, down Smith Boulevard, into the George Washington Memorial Parkway, laughing to himself.

They crossed the dark and sinuous Potomac over the Arland D Williams Jr. Bridge, entered 14th Street and stopped outside the Willard Intercontinental Hotel.

Handing the cabby a fifty, Susan promised him another fifty if he waited for her.

Spurred by the Scotch in her bloodstream and a tad shaky on her feet, she followed Eileen's killer at a discreet distance into the grand lobby of the Willard with its giant, soaring columns, elaborately decorated ceiling and enormous globe chandeliers. Even in her current state, it was hard to ignore the fact that the place was breathtaking. And she found it hard to reconcile the reality of such a merciless killer residing in the environs of such civilized opulence.

Keeping a discrete distance behind the killer, Susan mingled with guests, and made her way close enough to hear that the killer had a reservation for two nights.

This was the guy who'd nearly killed her, she thought, backing up now. He'd killed Eileen, and who knew how many innocent patients. She felt silly stalking him when she ought to expose him right now, alert hotel security, call the police. But she was cognizant of her fugitive status. The last thing she needed was a brush with the law. If Vincent were here, however there'd be no dilemma. He'd take care of things in his usual, confident way.

But . . . then . . . Vincent didn't have to be here, she thought. All she had to do was wait for his call. She'd let him know where Two-Fingers was. And while this killer

indulged himself in the grand luxury of this hotel, Vincent would sound the alarm, get the FBI to nab the man.

Assured of her resolve now, she left the hotel. Back in the cab, she instructed the driver to take her to the Marriott. All the details had been neatly written on a yellow legal page for her by Joe, and she'd kept it safely in the side compartment of her holdall.

At the Marriott Vincent had booked her into a suite.

In the lounge, she kicked off her sneakers. Then checked out the bedroom with its king-sized bed. The bathroom was fit for a princess, with separate shower and bath and double vanity. The bedroom had every mod-con she could think of. She plopped on the bed and rested against the headboard wishing Vincent would call. He'd warned her against calling him. The calls could be traced back to this place by the police or Sloane-Wright. So she waited.

Her body, despite the encounter with Two Fingers, drifted to a dreamy place. It had been a long, long time since she'd last been drunk. And she hated the feeling. She was never one to hold her drink. One Scotch was bad enough. She had had several. She gained confidence, strength, too, but with that came the solemnity she found hard to take. She thought of Vincent, his kiss, how it had made her feel— for a moment so safe and warm— then repulsed by her own guilt for Robert's memory. Then she thought of the call from Maddy, her young exuberant voice and a spicule of hurt pricked her heart.

She set Vincent's cellphone on the night table next to the hotel phone and rose. Joe had said: "Wait for Vincent's call, unless there's an emergency." Vincent had expected her to see Two Fingers, so she figured that didn't qualify as an emergency.

In the lounge, she dimmed the lights, curled up in one of the armchairs and ordered a pot of strong black coffee and sandwiches from Room Service.

Barely five minutes later there was a knock on the door.

She was so amazed by the speed of the service that it took a long moment to realize the man standing at the door was not a waiter but Mike the stranger.

He grinned.

“How the hell . . .” she began and instinctively backed away.

“Did I find you?”

“Y-Yes,” she said, her heart suddenly pounded, the glint in his eyes terrifying her. She shuddered when he stepped forward and reached out for her neck. His swift movements caught her off-guard. He was behind her in an instant, twisting both her arms and pushing her toward the bed.

He pulled out a knife and held it to her face. “Make a sound and I’ll slit your throat.”

68

VINCENT SWORE, unable to believe what an idiot he'd been. If he'd only checked the recording earlier, he would've spotted the man across the street, watching Susan take off on the Harley.

Thank god she'd made it to DC—he'd confirmed Cynthia Holmes' check-in. Still, with her cellphone off, the hotel phone continuously busy, he shuddered at the thought that Michael Moran was within reach of her.

I should've known Styles would have all his bases covered.

He'd cracked into the Delta Airlines Network, checked passenger manifests. Michael C Moran had paid by card- an impulsive thing surely, for he couldn't have anticipated Susan's move. They must've already known about Pockmark and Carlo, too and watched Vincent's place, just waiting to move in on him.

He resisted alerting hotel security for fear of blowing Susan's cover if she were safe. He knew if Moran wanted Susan dead, he would've done it before she even reached DC. It meant they were watching, trying to figure the scope of her mission.

He kept trying her cell, every couple of minutes.

Live pictures revealed Hans out back and another burly type out front. It was the police cruiser staked out a couple of blocks down that kept them at bay for now. *NYPD protecting me! How's that for irony. Just the kind of luck I need.*

FOR SUSAN IT happened in a blur, too swift for her slowed mind to register.

The panic hastened her craving. She began shaking as he'd rushed around, moving her with control, knocking the bedside phone off the hook and demanding her

cellphone. Watching, hawk-like, he'd allowed her to reach into her pocket for the tiny Motorola. She softly gasped as she felt something else there too. Carefully removing the phone, she handed it to him. Her body was wracked by pain now. She wanted to vomit, heaving as he twisted an arm behind her back.

Mike switched off the phone and dropped it on the night table. He'd flung her on the bed, reached into his jacket and removed two familiar-looking oblong pills.

"You must know about these, *Doc*. La Rocha. Roofies. Rohypnol if you want to be proper," he intoned in a sing-song. All for my pleasure. Think about it. I've a gun in my pocket, a switchblade up my sleeve. But can you imagine making love to someone as delectable as you while holding a weapon in one hand?"

Susan groaned, tried vainly to push him off her. With the date rape drug he could have his way with her and she wouldn't remember. Not that it mattered here because he was going to kill her anyway.

"No? Well, mighty awkward, however in a little while you'll be putty in my hands. And I'll give you the kind of ecstasy befitting your last night on earth."

She struggled against him, started to yell out but he slapped a hand across her mouth and nose. She stiffened, her eyes widening as her body convulsed, her eyes glazing over, slipping away. *Oh God it's happening again*. Her head throbbed, pressure building in her skull. Her eyes squeezed shut, her body twitched and jolted, dipped and arched as though she'd been zapped with defib pads on maximum. She tried to stem the involuntary reaction, to hold back, afraid he'd kill her from fear of losing control.

Mike jerked back. "What the fuck? You having a seizure." He straddled her, gripping her arms above her head. The battle went on for about twenty seconds then she grew still, staring at him with eyes that became distant, unfocused.

Mike freaked. He reached into his jacket and removed a mini bottle of liquor. He

shoved the tablets in her mouth, unscrewed the cap with his teeth and poured.

Susan choked and coughed at first, then relented. It was déjà vu, the brute straddling her, the gloom of the room, the fear, pain and hopelessness. Her eyes traveled beyond this intruder, caught the bright lamp above him, and sank deep into its glare. That orb, so familiar, taking her through time, to the full moon over the Back Bay, to another life she'd once had, to another moment like this trapped deep in her psyche.

How she longed to tell someone about it. Someone who cared. Not a therapist, some indifferent clinical entity feigning interest. She wanted to open her heart, tell all

But . . . what was there to tell? What was there to tell that the media hadn't already dealt with and analyzed to bits? That the FBI and the police hadn't sucked out of her . . . That Robert and she, married four years, he the aspirant politician, the famed Commonwealth prosecutor Robert Quinlan, and she, the quiet, supportive, hardworking doctor, were deeply in love? That their son, five-year-old Nathan was the luckiest kid on earth because they loved him more than life itself? Well, it didn't even skim the surface of their story. She thought of Nate, but also of so many other children orphaned because of the conspirators of darkness, because evil was boundless as good, only infinitely more ingenious.

Robert was responsible for sending two members of an organized crime family to prison. A third person implicated in the crime— Emmet DuValle—was never found until the night she and Robert woke to sounds in their bedroom in the dead of night.

The first to rouse, disturbed, Susan reached out for Robert. He barely lifted his head, when there was a sickening thud, the slap of metal on flesh and the sibilance of escaping air. Something hot and viscous ran down her fingers and she smelled a foreign presence in the darkness. There were whispers, muted and hoarse, like stifled screams. And she suddenly knew that Robert was screaming for help, only without a voice as he

gurgled beside her, under eyes that hovered ever closer toward her side.

She moved as fast as muscles, which still carried the memory of the young athlete in her, could. A stunning blow to the side of her head stopped her, weighing her down heavily, a rough hand clamping over her nose and mouth.

The sound of ripping fabric tore through the room, like flesh being riven to shreds. The weight shifted above her, huge, animal-like, forcing the air out of her lungs. Pain like lightning seared through her body. Her chest burned, felt like it would explode as she drowned in a sea of bewilderment and incalculable fear.

She couldn't imagine where the deputies assigned to them could be. Her anger cut through like a scorching thing, dispelling panic like fog in sunlight. Nate . . . Nate, oh dear God, Nate! She thought his name, knowing he would wake, stumble upon this horror. She had to save her baby. But he was stifling her. She was losing consciousness.

Somehow her irrepressible hands grappled with a monster whose every bucking movement brought a blade at her neck perilously close to the jugular. Jets of Robert's blood had splattered her face, soaking her eyes, making them red and blurry. The metallic flood of her husband's life force was choking her, slowly sapping her own existence. While the stench of brutal hands, the rank, warm odors of viscera filled the startled, reddening air. And from some oblique, distant surface, soft wailing, a sobbing voice called out for her, fueling her worst fears.

Nathan had come to the door.

Taken by surprise, the monster crushing her turned sharply and hurled his knife at the figure approaching the bed. The moment of distraction was enough for Susan. She reached into the space between Robert's pillow and the mahogany headboard, retrieved the only weapon that could save them now.

Robert had sent many men like this away for life, courting danger for most of his

term as prosecutor. For that reason, he kept a loaded 9mm in its custom-made holster, with a release spring attached to the headboard. Susan was terrified of guns, didn't know how to use them, but Robert had told her enough, despite her continued protests.

"Relax, honey, safety's on. If ever you need to use it, flick this tiny lever here, then aim and squeeze. It's never about killing," Robert assured her, his voice all almond and milk. "It's all about leverage and protection- the ability to act decisively if needs be, to protect our family and the values we live by."

She released the lever the way Robert had shown her. Then she pressed the barrel against the monster, curled her finger around the trigger and squeezed. It was like a popping firecracker, a moment of stunned silence, and then it was over . . .

After that the young deputies came, breathless and determined, but too late for Robert and Nate whose bodies were still warm with the fading impulses of their lives.

Nathan in her sticky arms, her baby who'd died saving her life.

Duvalle was nowhere to be seen, but he left behind a dagger and a trail of blood, tracked by police up to a point, until it disappeared, swallowed into a night so dark that nothing good could ever have come from it . . .

And here she was, her life having come full circle to the same juncture. To what she figured was her fate. The room was now in semidarkness. Mike, she was vaguely aware, had switched off the bedside lamp and overhead light. The only illumination now was that spilling over from the lounge.

She realized she was sitting up now, sobbing, the tears that welled and brimmed from her eyes distorting the room, distorting the figure crouched before her, making him wobbly, insubstantial as a nightmare.

69

“OH, DON’T FEEL too bad,” he was saying. “La Rocha can do that to you, make you crazy and sad. For a moment there even I’d nearly lost it. I guess it’s true what they say, though— a beautiful adversary can be the most dangerous of all.”

He was squatting before her, his eyes black holes level with her own. He opened the buttons of her blouse, slipped his hands through her bra and cupped her breast, rubbing her nipples, causing her flesh to curl and stipple.

She shuddered.

“Which is what you are, Susan Conner. Fuck. I thought how perfect it’d be to end it in rapture. You’d expire on that soaring voltage of my ecstasy. You know, I never get to work with women who have it all— brains, beauty, and raw courage. When I saw you on that plane, smelled you, saw your spunk at following our man, I thought it’s the least I could do for you if it fell into place just this way.”

Susan opened her mouth. Her soft voice slurring as she spoke.

“Please don’t do this. I’ll do whatever you want. I’ll walk away, forget this ever happened. Please, I beg you.”

Mike uttered a nervous laugh. “The fuck? Been twenty minutes and you’re still functioning in the present.” He frowned. Studied her. “But barely, I think.” His eyes now catching the red hue of the digital clock, gleamed like lunacy. He squeezed her nipple hard making her gasp. “Anyway, it’s way too late for mercy now. You know far too much. In less than twelve hours the assassin will be in the George Washington Suite, looking into the president’s eyes, administering the lethal injection. And I can’t

risk having you screw that up. No way. You're only here because I let you, dear Susan. I followed you from Bach's apartment this morning. Could've taken you out on that Harley. *And* during the rest of the day, *and* at the airport. But my orders were to see what you were up to. So, here we are. I'm amazed, really, that you turned the tables on us, following our man to the Willard. How'd you find out? Our planning was spur of the moment, a couple of days in the making. It's how we like it, so no one can know what's going on. And how the fuck were you going to stop the assassin all by yourself?"

Serendipity, she thought. On Vincent's part. But what the hell was he talking about? She wondered. "We expected Professor Bentley to be in DC Tuesday." She spoke slowly, frowning. "And what did you mean about the George Washington Suite? Bentley is going to the White House . . ." She was confused. "You're going to kill me, anyway," she slurred, "So what harm could it do to tell me what I want to know?"

"Yeah. You're right," he drawled. "You're a tough cookie. But your speech is already slurring. In a little while you'll be mello Jell-O. So I guess I could grant your last request. It'll certainly help pass the time."

He stroked her thighs as she wilted, her hands on her lap. He undid the button of her jeans. "You want to know about the White House. Hah. It isn't even a part of it. The president herself has presented the perfect opportunity for her own demise. She makes regular secret trips to the Willard where your intrepid Chief administers her treatment.

"We were planning everything for Tuesday. Then Bentley got a call from his man at the White House. Everything had been moved up a day."

Susan could barely breathe at the news. Vincent didn't know. He was planning for Tuesday. And she was trapped here. Everything's going ahead the way Sloane-Wright planned. Evil was going to triumph, after all. Whatever she'd done to get this far would amount to nothing.

Mike went on. "Our special-effects team is going to turn the assassin into Bentley for a day. Most of it my idea, I must say. At the hotel 'Bentley' would be checked out as usual by Secret Service agents close to the president. Tomorrow, 10 A.M., he'll be escorted up to the president's suite on the tenth floor, where a vial containing a special delayed-action untraceable toxin will be administered to the president. The toxin will take effect twelve hours later. Bentley won't even know what "he's" done. No one will know about the assassination. Madam President will just not wake up the next morning. A brilliant fucking plan, if I say so myself."

Mike paused, as though he expected a reaction. But getting none from a drugged Susan, he sounded pleased. "Ahh, finally. Well, that's it, sweetheart." He kissed her lips, fondled her breasts then unzipped her jeans. And started to rise.

Susan took a deep breath, holding the stored effort within. This was one time she gave thanks for her hopeless addiction. Mike couldn't know that the drug he'd given her would barely have any effect. In fact it was having the opposite effect. Before he'd given her the drugs, she'd been feeling weak, had started to suffer her craving—had even begun having one of the withdrawal seizures, which were becoming more frequent of late—when he'd given her what she wanted. For nearly two years her system had taken the best and gotten used to most of it. Tolerance. He could've given her a double dose of morphine right now and it would barely say hello. The irony was that she could hardly function without drugs. Now she was alert as she could be. The adrenaline even canceling much of the effects of the Scotch. She'd slurred for effect. What had Vincent said? Life's a game. Well so far she thought she was playing it well.

She was aware of her thudding heart, the familiar thrumming in her ears. He'd been right when he said she was stalling, waiting for the right moment. As he rose, off his haunches, she yanked the handset from the phone on her right and slammed it into

Mike's face. Immediately she used her advantage, leaned back and kicked him in the groin, sending him sprawling backwards.

Mike uttered little more than a grunt as he landed on his back, his head hitting the far wall. Susan used the surge of her own confidence now. She spun around and leapt toward the small table. As Mike was rising onto his elbows, she hefted the vase, came at him and slammed the object down on him.

"For Robert and Nate, she sobbed. For good measure, she yanked the lamp off the night table, slammed it against him, watched him collapse.

She breathed hard, her lips quivering, her heart hammering against her chest. Her hands trembled. Her knees could barely hold her up. She let the hysteria settle, watched him awhile, slumped against the bathroom door where he'd fallen. His body remained still, blood oozing from his head, soaking into the carpet. Turning away, she fell back onto the bed, holding her head in her hands – the tears a torrent now.

Eventually, she lifted her head. *Dear Lord, what now?* Calling the police was out. She didn't know if Mike was dead or dying. But there was little she could do. Immediately she thought of Vincent, knowing he'd have the answer. Reaching for the displaced hotel phone, she set it, then tried to recall Vincent's number in vain. It had to be on the cellphone! She picked it up, pressed the power button, only to wince when it asked for a pin number. The default zeroes didn't work. The small details, she thought, angry for not having been more prepared.

Again she tried the hotel phone and went through the operator this time.

Vincent picked up on the first ring. "Susan?"

"Oh Vincent," was all she said and sighed.

"Susan, thank God, you called. I was worried sick when I couldn't get through. You all right? What happened? The line in your room was perpetually busy, and the cell

phone is still switched off . . .

“Susan . . . ?”

She stiffened, catching her breath, the skin on the nape of her neck tightening as she saw something move in her peripheral vision.

Vincent’s voice squawked in the distance, faraway New York, beyond help, beyond hope. “Okay now, don’t panic, but you’ve been followed. I’ve been trying to reach you, tell you that one of Sloane-Wright’s goons, Mike Moran has somehow tailed you. Whatever you do, don’t leave your room and don’t let anyone in. Stay put until I call again.” She managed an *unh hunh* as she caught the gleam of metal in Mike Moran’s hand. It was long and curved like a hunter’s weapon inches from her face. Vincent was asking her something, but she couldn’t hear distinct words any longer, she couldn’t even speak. Her own breathing in the phone was suddenly loud, her pulse throbbing against the earpiece, the rapid beating of her heart like a kettledrum.

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BLOOD PULSED FROM his head. A shard of glass protruded from his left eyeball. She couldn't believe how he could still be alive, standing, knife in hand, his lips stretched in a bloody grimace.

The blade inched toward her face. He slipped to his knees and spoke in a whispered growl against her ear. "Say . . . you're . . . resting, will call . . . later."

She obeyed as the blade dug deeper into her neck.

VINCENT SIGHED. Thank God she was okay. Still, he wondered about Moran. As long as she stayed in her room, doors bolted, she'd be okay.

While he waited for her call, he decided to check on the phone recordings.

There were a couple of domestic calls and then one which caught his attention. It was a male voice, familiar— the kind he'd heard on TV, CNN, Larry King. The caller did not identify himself, but began talking about Bentley's trip to DC:

Caller: Good afternoon Professor. This is about your trip Tuesday . . . Change of plan. You're required Monday. The flight has been arranged for 7:30 A.M. Same procedure as always. I trust you'll make the necessary adjustment to your schedule.

Bentley: Monday? Of course I'll—

But the caller had already clicked off.

The digital readout placed the call just before lunch time when Vincent had decided to repeat his checks on the VR system. This was a surprise. He'd been expecting no further developments on the Bentley line after that call from Styles the previous evening. This changed things drastically. Susan *had* to know, of course but it

was midnight now and he wasn't going to disturb her.

He tried the SW500 files but as the hours ticked by, he could barely concentrate. Something troubled him, something in his subconscious. Around 4:00 A.M. he tried her. The cell phone was still off. The room phone remained busy.

The way he'd lost her on that last call, he ought to have figured it wasn't normal. There'd been sounds— the mouthpiece being covered, the way one would do in company. Christ. He cursed himself. Again he'd missed something, his judgment clouded by preceding events. He pictured Moran in her room. Then he shook his head. No. If Moran was there, she couldn't have called.

He couldn't bear that she was alone and vulnerable with Moran in the know. He knew he had to get there, be by her side. But the earliest shuttle for DC was at 6:30 A.M.

Restless, he tried Hymie's number— home, cellphone, for the tenth time that night. *Dammit Hymie, answer. Where the fuck are you?*

Around 4:15 A.M. he went to his kitchen for coffee. He felt the beginnings of a headache and went to his meds cupboard for aspirin. He uttered a soft gasp. Most of the boxes were open, empty—Vicodin, Oxycontin, Xanax. *Oh Christ Susan.* He recalled the signs, the trembling hands, darting eyes, the way she doubled over in pain.

He rushed to the lab, went online and booked himself onto the first shuttle to DC. Now all he had to do was figure a way out of the apartment without being seen.

Vincent packed a backpack—underwear, clean shirt, toothbrush, and Leland's memory stick. His finger hovered for several seconds over his cellphone power button—What if Susan called? What if she needed him? He switched off anyway. Could not risk being followed, or traced by either Sloane-Wright or the cops. Back in the lab, he took the spiral staircase to the roof and gazed at the gliding equipment stored there.

Impossible was O'Hara's exclamation. The homicide cop obviously paid little

attention to problems the beat cops had experienced over the last couple of years with sporadic incidences of urban gliders leaping off buildings and playing Superman or Spiderman over the city. O'Hara also didn't know about the modifications that Vincent and a few other enthusiasts had made to conventional equipment.

Vincent felt a little trepidation as he lifted the tarp of a small folded piece of apparatus. Unfolding the equipment he revealed what appeared to be a large bird— a swallow— made of terylene (Dacron) sailcloth in stripes of many neon colors. The lightweight structure was held together in shape by four aluminum alloy tubes. Three of them formed a narrow arrowhead modified to resemble the shape of a swallow's head and wings. The fourth tube formed the crosstube joining the others and stretching backward to the extended swallowtail, completing the structure.

A conventional delta winged hang-glider would barely work in the urban environment because of the large wingspan. It would be cumbersome and perilous within the canyons of the city. This structure was extremely narrow and streamlined— a factor making it potentially unstable. To counter this Vincent had designed a smaller structure fitted atop the body of the "swallow" a design borrowed from that of a biplane.

Vincent slipped into his flight suit wearing helmet and goggles. He hauled the ultra-lightweight glider across to a vertical pad. This structure was about four yards high and situated opposite to the "gangplank platform" which he'd tried to fool O'Hara with. This too was covered by a green tarp, which he now untied and removed to reveal another contraption that caused him further trepidation. It was always the same, he thought, every time he used this. The nerves, the thrill of danger similar to the moments before making a bungee jump. The contraption was a cross between a trebuchet and a large archer's bow. Leaping off a high skyscraper didn't need this. Mild air currents and the angle of the wings were sufficient to create lift. From his low rise, however, Vincent

would need an assisted launch for an effective starting altitude.

Turning a crank, Vincent exposed a second platform— sliding over the first so that the fully extended structure now reached a height of eight yards. Checking the cables that secured the rig to the concrete roof, Vincent fitted the keel of his “swallow” glider into a circular slot in the four-inch by ten-inch rubber band. Two thirds up the keel tube was a short horizontal catch, which he fitted against the curved bow. In effect, his glider was the arrow in the giant archer’s bow. Reaching for another crank on a shaft, along the side of the structure, Vincent rotated this, adjusting the platform to a sixty-degree angle off the horizontal, with the bow on the underside of the rig. Just before climbing into the prone harness of the glider, Vincent “loaded” the launch assist by stretching back the band using a third crank. The entire procedure had taken him less than fifteen minutes and now he was ready for take off.

In the cool dark underneath the tilted platform, suspended like a bat at the end of its long night, Vincent breathed deeply and gritted his teeth. He couldn’t recall the number of times he’d done this crazy stunt to surprise Joe or one of his glider buddies in Greenwich Village. He ought to be reasonably accomplished at the task. *But every flight was different*, he thought, his hand on the short release lever. Sudden vertical air currents between the huge buildings, or unexpected gusts of wind, could easily throw the narrow glider off its balance, slamming him against a building or sending him into free fall. It was no different launching a conventional glider off a cliff top, or soaring above forests and farm land in open country. The thrill always outweighed the risks. This time though, it was not about the thrills, he thought. Susan’s life depended on it.

Counting from three, he flipped the release lever and secured his gloved hands firmly against the cross bar to minimize recoil. A short jolt, followed by the thwack of the band and Vincent launched up sharply into the silver night. With the wings

collapsed against his side, the craft was as streamlined as an arrow. For several seconds of lift, Vincent felt the intense drag against his cheeks, the force driving through his body and rigid legs straining against the stirrups. The rigging cables gave a long muted creak against the thrust, before falling silent again as Vincent's own tension eased.

For a contraption built in a backyard garage, it always amazed him how much force it generated. The glider rose swiftly, soundlessly at least seventy feet into the air before leveling out. He braced his body in the harness as he reached out with both arms and pulled two levers on either side of the keel tube. This snapped out the wings, which locked into place. Immediately the glider caught the increased air resistance and momentarily stalled, going into a short fall before he edged the nose forward to gather speed. As the wings now found the mild night currents, the glider gradually rose another thirty feet, before leveling out easily above the low rises in the East Village.

On a westerly course for Joe's following 8th Street, he scanned the twinkling grid below him, wondering if anyone down there was looking up, seeing this strange human bird. A sudden gust between buildings caused the contraption to tilt precariously and he made the correction, reminding himself to concentrate—for Susan's sake.

Within a couple of minutes he was gliding over the St Brigid Church and Charlie Parker Place. Then, over Tompkins Square Park . . . He imagined the statue of the boy and girl down in the park below. It was one of the poignant stories his father would read him when he was little. The statue was a monument to a terrible disaster. Well over a century ago—on June 15, 1904—over one thousand local residents perished in the *General Slocum* steamer tragedy. The boat crowded with women and children caught fire on the East River during a pleasure cruise, causing a great upheaval in the lives of many men who'd lost their entire families.

As Vincent shut his eyes for a few seconds in silent respect for the dead, a

troubling thought crossed his mind. A century from now, he wondered, would some man like him be thinking about a monument to the thousands who could be killed by SW500. He knew it wasn't the same. AIDS was the real evil, not the flawed SW500. But when salvation turned out to be its opposite—hopelessness—then that was a tragedy too. In that moment he prayed he'd find a way to keep his dying mother's wish.

Looking ahead now, he checked his altitude. Across the park he made gradual adjustments. Pushing on the bar ever so delicately to increase his drag, Vincent slowed his speed enough to lose altitude. Then pulled his body forward to drop the nose and gather speed. Further along 8th Street, in increments he decreased altitude while maintaining speed. He executed a gentle turn South West just past St Marks and before McSorley's Old Ale House. Now he soared over the six-story Cooper Union building—another place of hope, his father had read him about. It was crucial at this point, he thought, to factor in his elevation and distance as he neared his destination, so as not to slip too high or too far. Or he'd be caught by the much taller buildings downtown.

All along the eastern sky dawn was breaking, a magnificent blue-edged horizon opening its window to a new day. In that first pale light, Vincent glimpsed his destination close by and began his gradual descent using only experience and instinct to guide him there. Rapidly now, he crossed early morning traffic on Third and Fourth Avenues and then the dark rooftop of Joe's building began to fill his gaze. Dropping his wings, Vincent angled himself carefully until his feet thudded lightly against the concrete. He ran several steps before bringing the glider to a stop.

Five minutes later he was seated astride the bike that Susan had parked outside Joe's. By 5:45 A.M., he was standing in the airport building, impatient to get airborne once again, but with a full hour to spare before the flight.

71

SUSAN WOKE INTO darkness, her body aching, her head feeling like it would crack wide open from the welling pain. She'd slept where she'd fallen— backwards on the bed— tuning out with exhaustion and immense relief.

For the third time in as many days she'd teetered close to death. Only fate had saved her. *One life for each of the tragedies in my life. Now I have none more to spare.*

She stared at Mike on the carpet. Through the eye, he'd been wounded in the frontal lobe. People survived long periods with wounds such as those. Ultimately it was the blood loss that killed him and spared her.

In time the reality of it struck her and she retched all the way to the bathroom where she saw that her hair and face were caked in blood. She swallowed a handful of pills from her stash before reaching for the phone.

It was 7:30 A.M. when the operator put her through. All she got was his Voicemail. Without the pin, the cellphone was useless to her. She'd just have to wait.

CARMEN'S SIDE OF the bed was cold and empty when O'Hara's phone rang Monday morning. "I'm on a plane to DC," Ferry said. "You need to be at La Guardia on the next shuttle out." Once again she filled her partner in: "We tapped Bach's phones at the exchange. He made several calls to the Marriott Hotel in Washington. While cruisers sat at street level, I had watchers on the rooftops opposite his penthouse. You may wanna alert Metro in DC," she said. "I'm with Bach, but I'll wait for you before making any moves on the fugitive doctor."

DANNY ROMAN WAS up since early practicing on the medical kit.

Fucking geeks. Even a kid could set up a drip, they'd said. All you needed was a nice fat blue vein, like the Mississippi on a map, they'd said. Slide the needle in at an angle, they'd said. Of course, it was easy, but he just didn't feel comfortable doing it.

Like a fucking faggot nurse, he thought.

He was dressed in a tweed jacket with elbow patches, a blue button-down cotton shirt, burgundy bow-tie, khakis and brown half-brogues. Everything had suddenly gone into fast forward after the change in plans regarding Bentley's visit. They'd done his hair: brown and wavy like Bentley's, peppered with grey—more along the temples, balding at the crown. Tousled on top and not too particularly kempt.

He unlocked the temperature-controlled case and removed the mask. That too, he'd practiced a hundred times. He'd worn disguises in the past— mustaches, goatees, wigs, but this was kinda cool. They'd supplied a surgical adhesive for bonding the semi-synthetic prosthesis to the underlying skin. Bentley's bifocals formed the centerpiece, the spectacles offset nicely any imperfection in the appearance— if at all there were any.

Again, it was a surprise when everything was put into place. Roman smiled as a practice run, grateful for Bentley's goatee, which hid the difficult areas around the lips.

As arranged, the carbon fiber Luger .40 was in the false bottom of his aluminum case. At around 9:10 A.M. he went down to the Willard's Round Robin Bar, ordered a drink and waited for his twin to show.

72

SHE BURST INTO tears at the sight of him. He hugged her tightly, his eyes brimming. Then his expression turned sour. He sniffed the air.

“Whoa, that’s nasty.”

“The Sloane-Wright guy . . .”

She sprayed some of the perfume he’d packed for her, then led him to the bedroom. “I turned the air conditioning to the lowest to slow the decomposition . . .”

“Whoa,” Vincent said again. He pressed a hand towel to his nose.

“Breathe through your mouth,” she said.

Vincent took a quick peek, covered the body and they headed out to the lounge.

Susan had already showered, changed. She updated Vincent about Two-Fingers. Then the story— with gaps— about Mike. She had no recollection of his call. “Everything’s patchy, like a vague dream almost.”

“Yeah. Anterograde amnesia—kinda ,” Vincent observed. “You were lucky not to have lost it completely, though.” Silently, Vincent figured her drug use had been her savior. Ironically, even now, the after effects of that severe trauma hardly showed in her behavior, keeping her somewhat detached, able to cope. He studied her face, wondering if she herself had realized that, but said nothing further on the subject.

“Lucky me.”

“The hell you must have gone through, all alone out here.” He gave her another hug. “I can’t believe how careless I was in not checking all the exits.”

“At least we got to know how this is going to play out.”

They kept one eye on the clock, as she recounted Mike’s bizarre plan— or, at

least, most of it. How suddenly the game had changed. It was 9AM. In an hour an unthinkable crime would be committed. Her mind flashed again to all those who'd died. How many more would die if they didn't save the one person who could make the greatest difference.

"We're here in DC, Vincent. Let's call someone, make this nightmare vanish."

"Whoever we called, right now, would apprehend us first. And by the time they did get around to testing our warnings in a few hours' time, it'd be all over. And while it might not seem as important now, but we'd have to give away the president's secret." He sighed. "I've tried Hymie already, hoping we'd get access to Secret Service. He's in a staff meeting at the White House for the next couple of hours."

Vincent tried his friend again. This time he informed the secretary there was a major security threat involving the White House and Hymie should call him as soon as possible. The woman reacted with a moment's silence— enough time for Vincent to realize it sounded like a crank call to her. "What did you say your name was?" she asked again, before promising to pass on the message to "Mr Goldman."

Vincent nibbled on the inside of his lip, as he paced the lounge, his fingers combing through his hair. He slapped a palm against his forehead. "Okay, this is the plan," he said, "We go to the Willard. While you head up to the – er- "

"President George Washington Suite. Tenth floor."

"While you head up there, I'll call Willard security, ask for Secret Service. The fact that I'd know of the president's presence and the reasons for her visit would be sufficient for my credibility. Same for you if you get close." He took her by the shoulders. "Look, I respect your need for maintaining confidentiality, Susan, but if it came to the worst, if we're stalled in some way, then anything goes, okay?"

She nodded.

They fine tuned their plan. Which was more of a bumbling effort to ward off what felt inevitable, given the way events had been moving so far. Susan was wearing the trouser suit that Vincent had bought her, but she put on the sneakers, knowing the fancy heels would fare terribly in a jam.

They were about to set out when there was knocking on the door.

Susan frowned. Vincent held out a hand as he edged toward the peephole.

"Cops," he whispered with a grimace.

73

THE SEVEN-THIRTY shuttle from New York to Washington, DC had landed on time. Without baggage and with the police escort, O'Hara was sitting in the Metro police vehicle with Ferry and two uniformed Metro officers just across the street from the Marriott Hotel just after 9.25 A.M.

Ferry had tried but the locals wouldn't let her anywhere near the doctor's room. This would have to be handled by Metro until permission for them to act was obtained. So she waited while O'Hara tried to untangle red tape through his cellphone.

The driver, a heavyset African-American Metro officer named Lionel Gervasse, glanced over his shoulder. "Look, Detective, we all in this together, a-yight. Now I got a man on the floor up there, another two backin up at the mall exit and we here securing the main exit. All we have to do is sit tight and your fugitive will be delivered to you. I'd do it your way. But, minus the paperwork, my hands are tied. I let you go in without the official say so, we got problems in court. We got lawsuits from these criminal lawyers. Jesus. This ain't the movies. Know what I'm sayin?"

AFTER DOWNING HIS glass of Coke— he never drank liquor on the job— Roman put on a floppy hat he'd brought with him, removed the glasses and hovered in the lobby. Presently, Bentley entered the hotel and headed straight for the reception. Roman observed the check-in with cautious optimism. So far everything was going according to plan, just the way he'd been informed by Styles. The time, the place.

Only one thing: Styles said they had no way of knowing which room would be assigned to Bentley. So Roman, carrying the aluminum attaché case, just like Bentley's,

followed him to the elevators. Despite the floppy hat, he held up a hand to obscure his face as they entered the elevator, stood beside each other and left together. The professor appeared busy with his own thoughts, looking harried, tired. In the elevator mirror, Roman noted that Bentley was about an inch shorter than him and slightly more pronounced at the midriff. But it didn't matter. People seldom noticed things like that.

On the sixth floor, Roman held back just long enough for Bentley to get to his room and slip in the key card. He moved swiftly down the luxuriously carpeted corridor and got his foot just inside Bentley's door a moment before it closed.

Bentley gasped. There was momentary hesitation, a quizzical look on his face as he wondered why the intruder looked familiar. Then he found his voice.

"H- Hey. W-Who . . .?"

Roman shoved his quarry further in and closed the door. He rushed at the dumbstruck Bentley with his gun and shoved him into an easy chair. "Keep quiet, stay put and you won't be harmed." Roman felt the urge to pull the trigger, but remembered Styles' warning. The professor cannot be found dead in the hotel. He is indispensable to the project and must remain unharmed. They would take care of him later, bring him back to New York. Uncapping a syringe given him by Styles, he jabbed Bentley in his thigh. "There. That should take care of you for a few hours, pal. Sweet dreams."

Roman quickly lugged the unconscious Bentley into the bathroom. After that he opened Bentley's aluminum case, transferred its contents to his own and filled an empty syringe from one of the toxin vials that Styles' technician had given him.

That's it. All he had to do now was wait for the Secret Service escort to show.

Roman studied himself in the mirror, mouthing Bentley's Southern drawl which he'd far from mastered in the few hours with the tapes. But he didn't think it'd be a problem. As highly intelligent as the brain was, it always covered up for things we got

used to seeing and hearing, the way we expected to see and hear them. So he looked fine. Perfect. He *was* Professor Carl Bentley. Smiling, he winked at himself, then slowly grew earnest, his eyes darkening. This was when the job began, the moment when he slipped into the mindset of the killer. A tingle, begun at the base of his skull, rippled through the nape of his neck, down his spine and out through his fingertips and toes. Closing his eyes, he let the thrill of it move like his own blood, nourishing him, supplying the current that powered his soul.

Yeah, he was ready for this.

SUSAN REMAINED SILENT, battling to keep from shaking as she heard voices from the lounge approaching the bedroom door. There were two besides Vincent's, which, for her benefit was loud enough to be clearly heard from where she was hiding.

"I assure you, Officer, the person you're looking for isn't here."

Susan bit her lip as she tried to pull the door of the cupboard fully closed. It remained open a slit through which she could see the bed and the covered corpse.

"Dr Conner is in New York. I saw her there before flying up."

"Just open that bedroom door, Sir."

"May I ask what the Metro Police's interest in this is, Officer?"

She heard a snort. "You've broken bail conditions. Dr Conner is a fugitive from the law, wanted by the NYPD in connection with a homicide— three if I'm to believe the two NYPD officers waiting patiently in the cruiser on Penn Avenue."

"The door, Sir. Chuck, stay here, keep an eye on him."

Light poured into the dim, chilled bedroom where the smell of the corpse was like a heavy invisible fog. She waited for the reaction.

"Jesus, what's that Godawful stench?"

The officer was standing right in front of her, his gun held in both hands just ahead of his paunch. He sniffed the air as he scanned the room.

She moved her head away from the slit in the door. A minute passed and then, "Oh, Holy mother of Christ! Chuck, you wanna get in here, take a look at this."

Through the slit she saw the second officer enter the room behind Vincent, who turned toward the cupboard. Their eyes met just as the second guy came in line with the

slit. He too had a gun out, held at his side, one hand gesturing for Vincent to move further into the room. The first officer was staring at the corpse. "Call for backup."

The second officer reached for his handcuffs and turned to Vincent.

"Sir, turn around with your hands behind you."

Vincent nodded at the slit in the cupboard.

Inhaling deeply, Susan placed her hands and foot against the cupboard door and shoved with all her might, screaming loudly as she did. It struck the second officer and sent him tumbling toward the bed. His momentum carried him past Vincent. His gun landed on the carpet with a muted thud. The first officer flinched, instinctively raising his arms to ward off an expected attack.

She was out of the cupboard, staring, when Vincent indicated the door. The only man in the room not surprised by her sudden move, Vincent was already reaching for the fallen gun as he yelled, "Run Susan, run!"

75

FERRY WAS EXHAUSTED. Like O'Hara she'd hardly slept since the Conner case literally burst in on them. This was one of those cases which had the media in frenzy. She knew how much getting that bitch meant to O'Hara. Her escape from under their noses at the station house smarted like hell. The media was in its element rubbing their noses in it, driving O'Hara crazy. This one's for Sean, she thought, dedicating her effort to the man she'd had a crush on for as long as she could remember. She often wondered what it might be like to be in his bed, in his hunky arms. This time she knew they had the doctor trapped. As the driver up front had said, "It's only a matter of time."

Ferry was in the middle of her fantasy when she spotted the blur at the hotel entrance. She did a double-take when a smartly dressed woman came hurtling out of the place into the dull gray morning. A plume of steam rose from the woman's mouth as she stopped momentarily, somewhat disoriented. Ferry frowned. This pained-looking pale female with the strawberry corona looked damned familiar.

As the woman took off down Pennsylvania Avenue, Ferry's brain figured it out. She was looking at the fugitive doctor—without the nerdy look: the ash blond hair in a tight ponytail, the thick glasses. "Holy sh—t," Ferry yelled as she gripped the door handle of the cruiser. *But where the hell was Bach, the smartass rich kid? And where the hell were the Metro uniforms supposed to be keeping guard upstairs?*

Ferry yelled out to O'Hara as she leapt from the car and bounded down the sidewalk. But her partner was already yards ahead of her.

SENIOR SECRET SERVICE Agent Harry Armstrong had been one of the closest to the Eagle for two years now. Muscular and strapping, the six-foot-six agent was in his late thirties, had curly dark hair, quick eyes and a perpetual squint, a la Clint Eastwood. The agent was the president's most trusted shadow, a dedicated, much-decorated veteran. A long time ago, he'd forsaken the idea of a personal life or the notion that his own existence had any personal value other than as a shield for the president. For him the job was a throwback to the days of yore, an era when honor was the only code among those who protected their kings, who died for them without thinking, without heeding the primeval call for personal survival. An avid player of old world strategy games on his PC, he often fantasized about being a knight in King Arthur's Court.

So he was worried today, just as he had been last week and the week before— in fact for almost a year now. This weekly clandestine assignment was a shaky thing at best. He ought to have had twelve men besides the six assigned: Two on the floor, two in the lobby and two at the basement entrance that they used.

Armstrong knew about the treatment. Not the details, just that the president needed her privacy on this one. He knew, too, that this was a conspiracy against the American people. An illegal act. Which was why they were on a skeleton crew of a trusted few. Only the core. The usual agents always assigned to travel with the president were kept back at the White House, which kept public eyes away from this mission.

His view remained that all this could be done at the White House without serious risk. The president's Chief of Staff, however, had been concerned with the question of the visiting doctor. The ever-present media representatives in the West

Wing were a breed of omniscient entities. Better to keep everyone assuming Madame President was still in the Oval Office, including her own round-the-clock on-call team of physicians. Keep everyone looking inward.

This was a monumental task. Most staffers had access to electronic trackers that kept them informed of the president's whereabouts, in case of emergency. The trackers were updated by way of Secret Service radios as the president moved. For Myers to accomplish the deception, he had to have his most trusted agents keep the display showing: POTUS: OVAL OFFICE, throughout the morning.

Then there was the quick exit through the doors leading out to the colonnaded veranda, past the residence through secret corridors leading to the north side of the White House, out the tradesmen's entrance in a maintenance van, then out the grounds of the White House itself. Myers kept all eyes busy and away from the AWOL principal by timing the choicest media briefings in the Press Room to correspond with the president's weekly excursions. This morning the press corps was eagerly awaiting the latest on the Korean Crisis while the president made her way to the Willard.

Harry knew full well that the successful execution of these undetected excursions was a technical miracle only someone like Myers could pull off, but it could never go on without detection, without an explosion of some kind. The very nature of clandestine operations bred the kind of risk no professional should ever undertake.

Armstrong nodded at Seth Fraser, his partner on the other side of the door. They were no more than soldiers. They followed orders. And so, sent in ahead to secure the OPLOC or "operational location", they waited here expecting the Eagle to arrive at any moment. According to the established routine, they'd then be replaced by two other agents while they went down and escorted the 'visitor' up to the Presidential Suite. After that, they would reassume their posts and wait out the time. The treatment would

take a little over thirty minutes and then they'd be out of here fifteen minutes after that. Mission accomplished in a little under an hour. Kathy Hirschorn, the president's secretary would have this penciled into the President's Oval Office appointment book thus: 9:50— Myers enters. 10:55 Myers leaves. 10:55 to 11:05— phone calls.

The ten minutes after 'returning' would give the president recovery time before resuming the rest of her hectic schedule for the day.

For Armstrong there was never a moment's peace whenever he did this weekly op. Today, he was excessively uneasy, plagued by an inexplicable sense of foreboding.

Was it the weird weather?

This morning he'd felt strange even stepping into his car to get to work. The sky had looked so screwy, clouds in an odd spiral formation. It had felt like looking at a satellite photo of a twister, in rural Oklahoma. Only he was looking upwards into the sky. And it had been colder than it had been in a long time. Damned strange. Then again, he'd always had a bad feeling about these missions. The only comfort he enjoyed was the thought that Myers, probably the shrewdest, most wily bastard in the country, never hovered too far from them at times like these.

"'EAGLE' ON THE MOVE," squawked Armstrong's earpiece and the two men checked their weapons, glanced this way and that, then stiffened.

When she arrived, the tall, lean, president was wearing a baggy navy track suit. A dark beanie covered every strand of her blond hair. Oversized sunglasses and a thick woolen scarf covered her eyes and most of her face. She moved at a brisk pace, head cautiously angled down, blue-gray eyes alert. Approaching the door of her suite, the 'Eagle' nodded briefly at an expressionless Armstrong before disappearing inside.

Armstrong stepped away from his post as the two agents escorting the principal wordlessly assumed charge for the time being.

IF ROMAN WAS nervous, he didn't show it as he smiled at the imposing Secret Service agent standing inside the door to his room. Hands clasped in front of him, the agent rocked imperceptibly on his feet, sharp eyes looking, but not really seeing. This is what he banked on. The agents around the president or any important figure always scanned the surroundings for danger, never the protected. It was amusing really, how serious these fucking creeps took themselves, when he could really see from behind his disguise that they were palooka. *I mean, hello, here I am about to assassinate the president and you guys don't suspect a fucking thing!*

The other one was checking the aluminum case, running the detector on him when the alarm sounded. Roman smiled and pointed to his belt. This was a rehearsed move on his part. Bentley had told Styles about the belt problem already. The stoic agent checked the metal buckle and nodded, unaware of the row of 'extra' bullets taped to the inside. They led him to the door. They must have run this routine hundreds of times and yet showed no familiarity toward him. Like the fucking movies. There was no small talk, no *hi's* and *hello's*, just nods, looks, silent procedure, a kind of ludicrous protocol built on mimes.

The Secret Service agents nodded at each other and the large guy said, "This way, Sir," and escorted Roman from the room.

77

FERRY SWORE LOUDLY, admonishing herself for her delayed reaction. It was the disguise that had thrown her. But not O'Hara, she marveled. He'd been out of the starting blocks from the moment "Go". And now the damned crowds were not making it any easier. From somewhere in her wake she heard the Metro uniforms yelling. This was the worst time to be worrying about due procedure. So what if she was NYPD? She was still a fucking cop.

O'HARA CUT A swath through the crowds, his breath billowing up in small clouds, from above his head. *What the fuck was the bitch up to in DC? Fucking Feds. They were supposed to have handed me this one on a plate. A curse on you assholes.*

The cold cut like a razor. His chest burned. He hawked and spat on the sidewalk, ruining the fact he smoked too much and worked out too little. Ferry was bringing up his rear, her rhythmic breathing closing in. He could also hear the frantic yelling of the Metro guys. *Fuck them. This was as personal as it was ever going to get.*

He came up to 14th Street and stopped as traffic, accelerating from the stop, was a raging torrent in his path. O'Hara's heart was pumping so wildly, he was starting to see stars. The pulse throbbed at his temples, tearing at his fucking neck.

Up ahead the doctor "reappeared" from the masses and he waded into traffic, holding up his shield as if anyone was paying any attention. Ferry had caught up with him by now, and they were causing a chaos of metal as cars swerved and screeched and honked their horns at the two crazies on the street.

SUSAN LOOKED BACK only once to see the terrible twins giving chase. Behind them were uniformed officers. There was no sign of Vincent.

She looked at the blue canopy and then up at the hotel. Even under a cloudy sky, the grand building shone brightly. Its majestic limestone walls, the light-colored brick, making her squint. The Willard's lobby was only a stone's throw away now. All she had to do was keep running, enter, execute the plan. Instinct guided her otherwise.

Chances are they'd catch up, capture her and ruin the plan. She had to throw them off the scent. If she entered the Willard now they'd know her destination. So she pictured the perfect grid of the city she'd once roamed as an intern. She ran onward to 15th Street. If she went north then east again before turning south down 14th, she figured it would bring her round the block and back to the main entrance. If she moved fast enough and it worked out just right, the hunters would lose her on that grid, unaware of her final destination.

Her chest throbbed as she ran the roundabout route, sacrificing vital minutes to save their plan. A short distance from the entrance she slowed, brushed the sweat from her forehead and adopted a casual walking pace. Passing the doorman she began to smile. Then caught her breath.

The ruse hadn't worked. She spotted O'Hara and Ferry on the sidewalk. Ferry was scanning the crowds. O'Hara was looking at her. He was tapping Ferry and starting in the direction of the entrance, when Susan gasped and took up again, her feet responding to her desperation. Within moments she vanished beyond double doors, into the imposing lobby.

VINCENT WAS SOAKED. Sweat poured from his body despite the frigid air in the room. The stench had become overpowering by now and he felt sorry for having to

leave the cops locked in here with the corpse.

He couldn't believe he'd held a gun to their heads while he bound them with bed linen. They wouldn't be leaving that room anytime soon.

All the time he kept apologizing, reassuring them that he meant no harm, their radios would be in the next room, that he'd phone later and let the hotel security know.

9:52 A.M. SUSAN had no time to wonder how the NYPD detectives had followed her to DC. There was hardly time to think at all. She felt certain that they had no idea what she was doing in this hotel. And that bit was something in her favor. The element of surprise had been the theme of her survival so far and she meant to keep it that way.

Deliberately, she avoided the elevator route. It was the first place they'd check once the NYPD's Terrible Twins sounded the alert.

At the stairs, she breathed deeply and went for it, bounding up flight after flight until she collapsed on the fifth floor, exhausted, her calf and thigh muscles aflame.

It was time to try the elevators.

She wedged through the fire-escape door, just enough to scan the area around the elevators. Thankfully the place was deserted. She stepped out and quickly checked the illuminated numbers above the elevator. The closest car was two floors down. The fourth floor light flashed. Then she heard the deep sounds of the hoist and the ding announcing the elevator's arrival. She was hot, breathing hard, damp with sweat. Keeping her head low, a hand around her mouth, Susan hardly paid any attention to the couple in deep conversation already inside the car.

She was about to step in when the tall male stepped out, checked the area around the elevator, quickly moved a little further and checked out the corridors before returning to the elevator held open by the woman—

Susan gave a tiny yelp as she realized it was Ferry and O'Hara. She turned and bolted back the way she had come.

The extra adrenaline surge spurred her upward to the sixth, then seventh floors, when she 'hit the wall' and glided through— picking up that second wind— an almost dizzying rush. Her ears became muffled and slowly began to ring with a muted hum.

Down below, echoing through the fire-escape, she heard the squeak of O'Hara's shoes, his breathless grunting and Ferry's quicker, lighter steps rising toward her.

Dear God, it was all happening now. This was going down to the wire.

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ROMAN SWEATED.

Shit. Despite the supervised training and practice on the dummies at Sloane-Wright's lab, handling the needles and tubes of the IV on an actual person, freaked him. Killing was his *métier*, but not like this. He was out of his element here, trapped in a room with the President of the United States with armed guards stationed outside.

And she—besides a frigid “Morning, Professor,”—avoided eye contact and kept the beanie and sunglasses on. Like he was just the help.

Lounging in that easy chair, sleeves rolled up, iPod earphones plugged in, reading— *What the fuck?*— something called *The Art of War* by some Chinese guy. Just when the loco Islamic types and the slant-eyes were rearing their rag and dragon heads. Roman sneered at the large type quote on the back cover: *Know thyself, know thy enemy, and in a hundred battles win a hundred victories.* He suppressed a snort. So much for applied knowledge. Maybe he was doing the country a big favor today.

Earlier in the Oval Dining Room he'd sat thirty minutes while they waited for Her Majesty to show. The view was all the way down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol. Grandest fucking hotel he'd ever been in. Then the two agents led him via the living room into the master bedroom of the mansion-sized suite.

He gave her a sidelong glance. She wouldn't give a shit if she were here with the Grim Reaper, so long as her Secret Service babysitters gave the green light. *Well here's one for you, Madam President: Trust no one but yourself, and in a thousand battles win a thousand victories.*

When he raised her arm, got her to make a fist and pump, she barely took her eyes off the page. Waiting for the vein to pop, he thought all he had to do was plunge the needle in. But he sweated under the mask. Had an urge to abandon the protocols, yank out the Luger and let her have it – choop choop. Yeah, an apt Chinese ring to that. He even started for the gun when—

Wait a minute, Madam President was saying something . . .

She tapped her watch. “What’s up, Doc? You’re a little off the beat, today. You might want to move this along. I’ve got to get back to running the world, you know.”

Roman swallowed, fighting back the Luger’s tempting gleam. As he tapped her inner elbow, the president shut her eyes and shook her head, gesturing to the Ipod earphones. “Mmm, talking of beats, you just gotta love this Bach. Can’t imagine how I’d get through this weekly torture without his Mass in B Minor— a real lifesaver.”

BY THE TIME Susan reached the tenth floor, her heart hammered against her chest. Her legs wobbled and her ears throbbed as she burst through the fire-escape. Bent over—hands on her knees—she swallowed gulps of air in the wide, chilled corridor. It felt like she’d been deep underwater all this time threshing ever upward to keep from drowning.

Though she couldn’t hear Ferry and O’Hara any longer, the specter of capture loomed. She shuddered. Any moment a hand could lunge from behind her or, one of them, having exited the elevator just ahead, could be waiting with a gun.

Lurching along the carpeted corridor, her legs fueled only by fear now, she wondered where to next, which door to knock on? What had Vincent said . . .? Armed sentries would telegraph the president’s presence. She hoped to God he was right.

In the quiet of the carpeted corridor, the only sounds were of her breathing, her plodding footfalls. Then she took a ninety-degree turn and saw the dark-suited sentinels.

Her relief was immediate. She quickened her pace toward them. Gaspd, when the older, larger one slid away from the door, one hand in the air, the other reaching inside his jacket—for his gun.

“Ma’am. You can’t be here. This is a restricted area. Please turn back.”

The second man— a boyish face with a soldier’s buzz-cut hairstyle— aped the stance of the first. Their hard gazes darting around, scanning the corridor behind her.

She shook her head, took up again and smiled. “No, it’s fine, I’m here to save the president,” she wanted to say, but her tongue stuck against her palate. All she managed was a mumble and wave of her arms to show it was all right.

The agent grimaced, stepped forward and pulled the gun from his jacket.

“Ma’am, listen to me. You gotta turn around. Now!”

“W-Wait . . . it’s okay, I need t—” was all she managed- her words cut off by footsteps and a familiar gravelly voice:

“Dr Conner, this is the police. Stop or I’ll shoot.”

She flinched and cowered when both agents trained their weapons on her.

“Wait, please. The president’s in danger. You’ve got to get in—”

Again she was silenced when Armstrong grabbed her, spun her around and used her as a shield against O’Hara and Ferry. “Drop your weapons!” he commanded. Then into Susan’s ear, “I don’t know who you are or who you think’s in there, Lady. But you just made the greatest mistake of your life.” He turned to his partner, who was on his knees, gun aimed at the strangers. “Call backup!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, easy now.” O’Hara said. “I’m gonna show you some ID.” With his free hand he pulled out his gold shield. “NYPD. This here’s a homicide suspect. A fugitive we’ve been pursuing from New York.”

“You’re a long way from home,” Armstrong said. “Holster your pieces, turn

around and leave. Now, goddamit, or I *will* shoot.”

“Sorry. No can do, Pal.” O’Hara said. “Not until the fugitive’s in our custody. We’ve come too far to let this one slip away again. Let’s see some ID.”

Armstrong showed his credentials. “Secret Service. We hold jurisdiction here.”

O’Hara snorted. Secret Service, FBI, they were all the same. “Well, you ain’t taking my collar for a second time. I’m not leaving without her.”

Susan whispered to Armstrong, “Please listen to me. I know the president’s in there. The doctor with her is not the real Professor Bentley. He’s going to kill her.”

Armstrong hesitated. “I cleared the professor personally—” He abruptly looked up to see two Metro Cops rushing toward the detectives.

“What the hell?” It was the one called Gervasse. He immediately recognized Armstrong and broke the impasse. “Agent.” He nodded. “Damn. Sorry about this mess. They with me. And she’s a fugitive. Homicide in New York. I’ll take over from here.”

79

VINCENT PRAYED HIS trembling didn't show. The Metro cop's gun in his hand felt like deadweight when he stepped into the corridor and said, "Hold it. Nobody move."

It sounded worse than a movie line the way his voice broke. And he nearly wet his pants when the cops swung their guns to him.

"W-Wait. Don't shoot. I'd have at least two of you down before you even pulled the trigger. J-Just lower your guns and nobody gets hurt." He looked at Armstrong. "No, not you guys. And let her go. She may be a fugitive, but she's unarmed and I don't have time to explain."

O'Hara shook his head. "Fatal error, Kid."

"Y-Yeah. For you, Detective, if you don't listen to me. I'm just asking you to give the doc a chance to state her case. I'll gladly drop my weapon. The agents are free to keep their guns trained on me and the doc . . . that's a good trade."

Armstrong said, "That's okay by me. Just do as he says."

Vincent waved Leland's Flash drive at Armstrong. "This is for your boss. It's safe. You can check it out, for yourself." Stepping over to Susan, he slipped the stick into her pocket. "Go do this," he whispered.

ROMAN GLANCED at his watch and silently swore. It had just gone 10:05 A.M. and he was way behind schedule. He'd only just set up the drip— *a fucking eternity*. He'd got the vein only after the third try and the president looked queasy with all the blood he'd spilled. Roman had amazed himself by explaining something about her pressure being too low. He couldn't even think where he'd picked up that bullshit.

Reaching for the syringe loaded with Styles' toxin, he heard muffled sounds. It was a distant commotion that didn't translate into anything that concerned him. He was part of a tested routine here. All he had to do was complete his job and walk out calmly.

Instinctively, though, he remained alert. As the noises grew, he hesitated, slipped out the gun and set it among instruments, under a sheet of sterile paper. Then he picked up the syringe again and reached for the auxiliary port on the IV line.

The bedroom door opened and the tall black agent stepped inside, looked at him then turned to the president.

"Sorry to disturb you, Ma-am, but the Vice-President is on the phone."

President Madison frowned, removed her earphones and faced Armstrong.

"The Vice-President has an urgent question, Ma-am."

The president nodded, understanding the code. She dropped the book and sat up.

Armstrong held a hand up to Roman. "Sir, you need to put that down and step back toward that wall, then turn around and face it. The president has to take a confidential call." The latter part of the statement was another code. *We have to get you out of the location, Madam President. Present company is the danger.*

The president's eyes flitted, uncomprehending, to the man she knew as Professor Bentley and then to Susan who stepped through the doorway and headed for the IV line in the president's arm.

Roman said. "What's going on, here?"

The agent reached under his jacket. "You need to move away now, Sir!"

Roman feigned turning away but flung the syringe at the agent's face with one hand while he grabbed the Luger and brought it up with the other.

Susan handed the president the Flash and started to disconnect the drip when she heard the choop choop sounds. Swiveling, she saw Armstrong jerk twice and slam into

the wall. Her gaze flashed at Roman. She caught the dark flicker in his eyes and the room began to move as he brought the gun round and took aim at President Madison. This time there were triple choops and she felt the impact after each sound.

Susan had flung herself at the president. She took multiple hits.

IT WAS BIZARRE. Dreamlike. Painless. Like being punched in the chest, numbed with Novocain. Like narco. Taking it in the arm after a really bad day. And falling.

Falling. Then floating until she rose higher than the world around her. Rising until she was in the upper corner of the room where the wall met the ceiling. And her real self, her body, lay across the president, red flowers blossoming on her own chest.

She understood what was happening. She had no more lives to spare. And that was all right. It was time to see Nate and Robert again.

THE ROOM QUICKLY filled with people: the stunned Seth Fraser, the back up Secret Service agents, the cops, and lastly Vincent, who rushed toward Susan as her limp blood-soaked body was being lifted off the president.

"Oh Jesus Christ, Susan," he said.

VINCENT DID ALL he could for her in the minutes it took for the paramedics to arrive. The years away from the real blood and guts world of trauma medicine had made him a stranger to this kind of emergency.

Haggard and forlorn, he kept shaking his head as though this outcome was something totally out of keeping with what he'd expected. For the second time in two days, he faced a reality that had never featured in his list of probabilities.

This wasn't the safe realm of cyberspace where life and death were a series of

keystrokes he could backspace. For seconds that seemed like minutes, he moved in a hazy, automated state, doing what came from memory, from 'acquired' instinct.

He knew Susan was dying, he could see it happen and it wrecked him to be out of control, unable to press reboot, make her whole again.

He'd yelled at everyone, alarmed at the lack of attention. The agents huddled around the president and the fallen assassin, snapping into mikes, talking in codes, shoving the cops to the fringes and instructing them about keeping the area secure.

Controlled chaos raged in his peripheral vision. The older agent, on his back, had his gun aimed at the dead assassin as he yelled into the mike at his lapel. "Eagle down, Eagle down, get Myers, a Medivac, backup, we have a situation, dammit!"

Words faded into a drone then disappeared altogether. Everything was hazy, the air scarlet-tinged and muggy around him. The warm animal smell of viscera, the metallic odor of blood, and his emotion for her overcame him.

Yanking bed-linen, he'd stuffed these against her wounds. Tied a makeshift tourniquet to staunch the brachial artery then watched as uniformed men moved in on him, pushed him aside and took over. They'd set up an IV line, leads and monitors, fussing over the patient, moving sure-fingered over her, shaking heads, bunching jaw muscles as they drew her away on a stretcher.

Vincent followed in their wake, a zombie, as the senior agent stopped the lead medic, whispered into the man's ear, then slipped a card into the man's top pocket.

THEY WERE IN an ambulance battling traffic on a darkening Pennsylvania Avenue. Someone had mentioned Walter Reed Hospital. Clouds swirled upward, an eerie Twilight Zone kind of darkling pattern he turned away from.

All the people I love. All the people I care about . . .

Susan's eyes opened just a fraction then more, looking at him, through him, tears rolling down toward her ears. She opened her mouth which had begun to froth—red-hued foam at her lips, which were peeling apart slowly. He had to bring his ears close to her face, and he remembered another time, when his mother had been this weak, this fragile and he'd had to get this close so he could hear her last words.

"The girl. L-Laura . . . please . . . save the girl."

Then her gaze weakened, her eyes rolled up into their sockets and went still.

Vincent jerked when the alarms sounded. EMT's shoved him aside once again.

"Oh shit, she's goin' down! Systolic's forty and plummeting . . . Oh man, we got a flatline!"

80

IT RAINED AN incessant misty rain for a whole week, fine condensation enshrouding New York and the Hudson Bay in perpetual fog. A most curious thing, Vincent thought, in line with what the papers had called the strangest weather in the Big Apple for years. Hushed by the bitter cold, the Island shrank into a gray gloom. Cars crawled without sound through the precarious streets. Hardy indigents foraged amongst Dumpsters—dark bundles in alleys. From high windows they were the hunched survivors of some great holocaust, trudging through their becalmed post-apocalyptic city. It had never been this quiet, this somber, not since the aftermath of 9/11.

There had been no newspaper reports about the incident in DC. Nothing about the corpse in the Marriott, or the bodies at the pier. And naught on TV. There was not even a mention of Susan, who only days ago had been a fugitive, a face on national TV. Now, nada. The media had moved onto other stories as though this one never existed. Reality had vanished, leaving behind only incertitude and the vagueness of a dream.

Sometimes he felt trapped in a vacuum, gasping for air, moving from room to room in his apartment, from page to page in a newspaper, surfing channels, watching the phone and e-mail, in anticipation. Sometimes he was in a cavernous waiting room, holding the ticket numbered infinity, suffering the ceaseless white noise of machines, multiple TV channels, waiting for something . . . for a break in regular programming.

Outside, the city was drenched, miserable, eerie.

Then, after water, the snow arrived, breaking from the leaden sky like confetti on an absent parade. And Manhattan turned white-capped and sublime.

Still, he waited.

It had been weeks since that morning in the fall, when Susan Conner had walked into his life. Now it was late December, Christmas Eve. Slowly the crowds emerged, blinking into the bright world. The city gathered its bustle— dawn, midday, dusk- the hours flickering in his consciousness like time-lapse photography.

Then, there came a morning when Vincent sat in a taxi cab as it crossed the Brooklyn Bridge over a silver-gray, leviathan East River. Jim Croce on the radio—

If I could save time in a bottle, The first thing that I'd like to do, Is to save every day till eternity passes and then I would spend them with you

The windows were fogged but for the small clearing he'd made. He was dressed in a black leather topcoat, the collars upturned, a black wool-knit cap, black scarf.

The cab floated through the muted streets along snow-laden sidewalks and parks until the first line of crosses and tombstones of the Calvary Cemetery appeared. Then the cab, a canary in the white sea, stopped outside a gate bearded in rust-stained snow.

"Wait here," he said to the cabbie as he gathered up a bunch of flowers— jasmine and frangipani— he had managed to get from a florist in the Village, who grew them all year in her greenhouse. And he stepped toward the southwest corner of the cemetery. Under a sagging oak, at the granite tombstone he'd commissioned, he stopped, placed the blooms on the grave and threw a kiss toward the earth. He watched the snow for a while, stared into its endless reach, then turned and walked back to the Cab.

"La Guardia Airport," he said.

VINCENT LOOKED OUT to the gray grid of Washington, DC as the plane came to land at Reagan National Airport. The news he'd been waiting for had arrived without fanfare that morning and he'd been restless ever since.

He stopped by Floral Fantasy before catching a Metro cab to Walter Reed.

Greeting the receptionists with familiarity, he made his way to the Surgical ward where a nurse directed him to the recovery room at the end of the corridor.

An agent—dark shades, earpiece, a suit that didn't hide his muscular bulk—stopped Vincent, checked his visitor's pass and photo ID then let him through. It had been that way ever since she'd reached the hospital—no unauthorized visitors.

In the solarium, yellowed by winter sunshine, she was slumped in a wheelchair, her back to him, facing stands of oak and cherry trees.

The last few weeks she'd been a pale ghost hovering between life and death. Now her hair had grown some. The tint washed out so that her head was haloed by a luminous corona touching the tops of her shoulders.

He whispered her name from behind then came around to face her, held out the bouquet and smiled to hide his shock.

"Vincent? Oh my God," she said, trying vainly to straighten up, her voice little more than a whisper. Her eyes brightened. Pale lips mouthed a 'thank you'.

"Hey, sleeping beauty, you must be well-rested after all that slumber." He placed the flowers on a table, kissed her cheek and took the chair opposite her. It was hard not to notice her emaciation. She looked gaunt and fragile—an apparition almost.

"I feel more tired than I've ever felt in my life. They say it's been four weeks. But it feels like only yesterday when you and I were talking about saving the world."

"Yeah and nearly died trying," Vincent said. "Hey, I see you've picked up quite a collection of autographs." He gestured at her arm, at the scribbling on her cast.

"Yes . . . but still not the only one that matters." She looked at him. Her lower lip quivered, her eyes moistened. Reaching out with her good hand, she touched his face, his hair and uttered a soft moan. "Oh God, Vincent, where did you come from? Who are you . . . ? I don't know what I would've done . . . I . . ."

He patted her hand. "It's okay, Susan. You did good."

"Tell me . . . tell me everything that happened after the lights went out, Vincent. No one here wants to tell me anything . . . it's all 'hush hush, don't talk, just rest.'"

"Myers hasn't been here already?"

"Only the unsmiling men in dark suits," she said with a wan smile. "But I've been told he'll be coming soon."

"Well, you saved the president's life, flatlined a couple of times, then slipped into a coma after eighteen hours in the OR. Once they stabilized you, I took off to check on Laura but didn't get far. Secret Service types blocked my path. Escorted me to the Mayflower Hotel where Larry Myers waited in this room with a couple of other heavies. Somehow he already knew everything about me- the conviction for hacking, my human experiments. They sent people to my apartment, ran traces on my computers, found proof. They also discovered the telephone bugs."

Susan shook her head.

"As you can imagine, Larry pretty much had me. He knew about my companies." Vincent paused. "*Dime CyberTech, Dreamlife Enterprises*. I hadn't told you about those, have I?"

"*Dreamlife*? Good God, Vincent, it was featured in *Time*. That you?"

"Yeah. Which means I have too much to lose. Myers agreed to keep quiet, get my record cleared . . . in exchange for our silence."

"But . . . what about Styles, Sloane-Wright? Did they get them? Did you fix the therapy? Is . . . is everything going to be all right?"

Vincent looked at her. This woman who'd lost her family, blamed herself for her baby's death, then tried to save the world to atone for it. Just like him. All she wanted was everything to be fixed, to be all right.

He looked away, at his hands. He'd sensed his fingers moving, tapping at invisible keys, and he stilled them. What good was it, this ability to see the world in code, in data that you could manipulate to create and erase? Ultimately, he could change nothing, however much he tried. He could not fix the parts of her brain that had been killed when she'd flatlined, when she'd been starved of blood. He couldn't fix her arm that was paralyzed by a bullet that severed a nerve.

And the bad guys? Should he tell her that the men who'd tried to kill her roamed free? That Styles knew too much about the White House to be touched. That despite her taking three bullets for the president, she would never get the Congressional Medal of Honor, never get to be officially thanked, because the president would never reveal her secret—

“Vincent?”

He leaned closer to her and smiled. “Is everything gonna be all right? Well . . .” he started to say, then stopped, looked out to the trees in the garden.

Vincent recalled the moment she had walked into his apartment, her fear and bristling anger at his games, her ripped clothes, her suggestion that something was wrong with the cure. He remembered the glitch in SW500. How he'd eventually traced it back to the cheap alternate vectors that Sloane-Wright had switched to, instead of continuing to use the nanorobots he had prescribed. Taking her hand, he kissed it, placed it on his heart and said, “Yes, I think so, Susan, thanks to you.” Then he put a finger to her lips. “But shush now. No more questions. You're in recovery, remember? Just get well soon so I can take you home. The penthouse is too quiet without you.”